

Rites of Passage event to celebrate, recognize African American males

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At a time when so many negative images of young Black men are featured in the media, a local effort is mentoring and celebrating those who are headed in positive directions. That's the 11th Annual Rites of Passage, set for 6 p.m. March 7 at the Marriott Southwest in Minnetonka.

Sponsored by the Minneapolis chapter of Jack and Jill, the combination banquet, ceremony and celebration is designed to recognize young African American males who are seniors in high school as they make their transition into adulthood. Each year, the evening is dominated by an Afro centric theme designed to instill pride. Participants have excelled in academics, citizenship, entrepreneurship, community service and athletics.

Moreover, the Rites of Passage program is designed to promote an understanding of African American value systems relative to developing a positive lifestyle; awareness of the significance and importance of being a responsible man in today's society; self-awareness; and positive conscious behavior toward immediate and extended family.

The young men have participated in a series of workshops that focus on building leadership, college preparation, life plan development, journaling and mentor relationships to encourage learning more about themselves and their role as responsible men. The seven principles of Kwanzaa – Umoja (unity), Kujichagulia (self-determination), Ujima (collective work and responsibility), Ujamaa (cooperative economics), Nia (purpose), Kuumba (creativity), and Imani (faith) -are also incorporated into the program as a guide for daily living.

This year, 15 seniors from various high schools will be in the Rites of Passage program. Participants include Joseph Brooks, Drew Bryant, Sage Cross, Jacob Dodd, James Hoskins, Ayo Idowu, Daanjerae Johnson, Charles Jones, Ethan Lassiter, Aaron Leonard, Bryce McNeal, Marsalis Simpson-Faxio, Emmanuel Speare, Marlon Watts and Darian Yancy.

Janie Westbrook, mother of previous participant Jarrett Westbrook, knew of the program and reflected on what it meant to both the family and her son when he took part last year.

“Having witnessed firsthand the journey the young men took from beginning to end in the Rites of Passage program, I am extremely impressed and proud of them all for their commitment, their support of each other and their future goals and endeavors,” said Westbrook. “I am also thankful for the Minneapolis Jack and Jill chapter for caring enough to embrace and sponsor a Rites of Passage program. There is no doubt in my mind that this program has made an impact in my son's life and future.”

The event is a fundraiser and proceeds will go to help a non-profit that the initiates choose. Tickets are \$65 and are available by contacting: Rightsofpassage.mpls@gmail.com