

Each month, CAMP mentors and students go on an outing. They are pictured here at a Houston Rockets basketball game.

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C.A.M.P.

By Stephanie Jeter '06

A 10-year Aggie commitment to the youth of Houston

Newsletters are known for propagating news, not revolutions. But when Freddie Wong '69 penned a note to the Houston A&M Club, its decidedly hopeful tone drew an orbit of mutineers.

Apathy for America's youth had to be dismissed; Wong called for Aggie muscle to open the door.

That was three years ago. Two years since the Caring Aggies Mentoring Program was established and adopted its first group of Houston-based third-graders. Two years since a group of Aggies promised to commit until the third-graders became high school graduates. One year down, nine to go, and then comes college. "It's going to be a hell of an experience," Wong said.

He entertains no form of "maybe" and offers no scope for failure. He's a pragmatist who believes in action. But before CAMP opened the locked doors of committed mentoring three years ago, Wong spent a morning with his thoughts. An article in a local newspaper had some negative things to say about Texas A&M. An isolated incident, the headline read of a recent hate crime at A&M's campus. He closed his eyes hoping the silence would deflate the looming fear: an Aggie stereotype was being formed in Houston.

The streets whisper. Wong didn't like what was being said.

"We set out to debunk all that," Wong said. As a graduate of electrical engineering and well acquainted with the Aggie Spirit, Wong said the negative news stories aren't what A&M truly represents. "If you're going to change people, you have to start with the kids at a young age," Wong said. "That really got me thinking, if you're going to

change a kid's life, you really need to stay with them long-term."

Even as early as third grade, students learn the fleeting nature of stability, Wong said. A school bus schedule, that's something established. You can count on a ride to school. But an offer to help from an outsider once the bus doors open? That's about as unlikely as the yellow bus sprouting wings.

"The only way to influence the kids is to provide a sense of stability," he said.

The streets whisper, and this time, Wong wanted a different tale to be told.

"I didn't originally plan on playing much of a role," said Rodney James '03. "Basically, I just showed up one night."

James said he enjoys being around kids. It's a welcome creative reprieve after spending his workdays in the world of finance. Plus, James said he



knows what life is like when money is short. Life is different in the city, and there's an added challenge for students whose house key fits a door in low-income Houston.

"I was 8 when my dad left the note," he said. "He just left." James's family moved to Humble, and then to Spring. "My mom made \$400 a month," he said. "I know what it's like to be on that end of income level." He knows the need for a positive male role model.

When he's with his CAMP group, he can smell his childhood. Surrounded by the students, he can imagine what life would have been like had a youth minister not invested in his own life.

"That youth minister is the reason I went to A&M," James said. "And in the long term, a lot of things happened along the way because of that relationship."

He remembers a shared ride home with the youth minister from calling bingo at a nursing home. "He drove a Camaro," James said. "We talked about the Corps." The idea of discipline appealed to the boy who wanted to grow.

He watched the way his mentor lived his life, with forgiveness, strength and faith. The interactions changed him. The realization that he could affect change in the same way his mentors did, and that the kids that he helped mentor could continue the cycle proved that "what

you're saying and sharing is not wasted breath," he said. "Building discussion and communication—that builds influence. So that when our words come out, they're not just words, they're wisdom."

It's only the second year, but Kelly McCormick '99 can already see the changes. Her third-graders are now fourth-graders; "they'll be in fifth soon," she said. "They're getting older. You see them grow up." CAMP's mission to mentor children and inspire them to pursue higher education is carried out through once-a-month activities. They go to the zoo, a baseball game, a farm; McCormick said you see them just often enough to not really notice their growth spurts or increase in maturity. "At least I didn't realize how much they had grown until I compared them to the

CAMP's mission to mentor children and inspire them to pursue higher education is carried out through once a month activities.

third-graders," she said. Standing side to side, the change was monumental. "It's neat to think you're part of that."

The bus trips are where mentors and the elementary students are able to share the most. It's the little things, like pointing out the window to discuss a



cloud, or a billboard, or a building. McCormick said the students don't often get that. James said his question is simple: "I just ask, 'What do you think about that?'"

In January, James said, his fourth-graders marched in the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. parade. They discussed civil rights and respect.

What do you think about that? And they answer.

In February, they learned table manners at a mock luncheon.

What do you think about that? And they answer.

They are learning.

Year by year, event by event, "we're broadening their horizons," James said, with the hope that a group of caring Aggies will be the push needed to walk across the graduation stage.

"I want to be there, watching them walk across the commencement stage," Wong said. "Then four or five years later, I want to be in College Station, watching them graduate again." 🌟

CAMP hasn't just committed to one year of third-graders. While CAMP mentors move with their students to the next grade, a fresh batch of volunteers are introduced to the new third-graders. That initial promise to walk a group of students from third grade to high school graduation continues today, and will continue indefinitely, Wong said. Not every third-grader in Houston participates in CAMP; teachers from classes in North Forest ISD and Spring Branch ISD evaluate their students based on need and other circumstances. Wong reiterated that though CAMP encourages students to continue in school, it is not a scholastic program. "The mission of CAMP is to mentor children as they develop through school and inspire them to pursue higher education by reinforcing excellent academic standards; building confidence and leadership skills; providing fun, life-enriching experiences; and role modeling qualities of success." For more information on CAMP, visit www.houstonags.org.



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