



Boys to Men, Girls to Women: A Youth Mentoring Program Rooted in Excellence

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Who's Who in Black

When it comes to Black youth mentoring programs in Columbus and Central Ohio, Boys to Men, Girls to Women (B2MG2W) is one of the most empowering entities of its kind. Since its inception in 2011, the 501(c) 3 non-profit volunteer-driven organization has created and facilitated viable activities and initiatives vital to developing young people to make positive life choices for maximum personal growth.

"We provide programs that promote the development of youth ages 8 to 18," said Larry Seward, an original founding member and former executive director of B2MG2W. "We focus our services to impact youth in such areas as health, nutrition, building positive self-images, social and emotional relationships, educational growth, and community engagement and responsibilities."

Seward said the program began as an outreach initiative through his church, St. John AME when the pastor asked him to create a youth program after several male youths had run afoul of the law, mired in the juvenile court system and faced incarceration.

"We ultimately started Boys to Men, Girls to Women because we wanted to address both young boys and young girls," Seward said. "We are now a partner agency of the Mentoring Center of Central Ohio, (now Mentoring Ohio), which was an affiliate of Big Brothers, Big Sisters."

The organization's goal is to match mentors to mentees effectively. Mentors and mentees must meet a minimum of four hours per month and participate in activities of mutual interest. Parents/guardians and their respective youth are asked to commit a minimum of one-year to the program. Parents/guardians are also invited to participate in many planned activities.

Meeting space for the program is provided by the Worthington Schools District in Worthington, Ohio, a northern suburb of Columbus and includes a middle school where B2MG2W members can access the library and gym without cost to the organization.

The mentorship organization also takes mentees on fun and educational field trips to include, but not limited to, camping, Kings Island, National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, General Motors Global Propulsion Systems Performance and Racing Center, and the Cleveland Browns Training Camp.



Among the organization's signature youth activities are the panel discussions on careers held four times yearly. Panel discussions on careers have included such areas as health care, police and fire professions, financial literacy, legal/law, and more. Seward said the career panelists, for the most part, are African Americans. In addition to the career panelists discussing vital information about their respective professions, they also offer anecdotes about their personal lives and how they overcame adversities and navigated roads to their chosen fields.

In March 2023, Seward said an informative and memorable career panel was held at The Ohio State University's Moritz Law School. The event's topic centered on careers in the legal profession. The panel, moderated by the law school's Associate Dean Kathy Northern, consisted of distinguished Black attorneys, judges, and law school faculty members. Attendees – youth and adults – were encouraged to ask the professionals questions.

Another stellar B2MG2W activity is its Group Community Gardening Initiative, which exposes young people to the fundamentals of gardening. Rooted in partnerships with The Ohio State University School of Agriculture, Scotts Lawn, and Franklin Park Conservatory, the program's youth learn how to plant, grow, and harvest vegetables on the historic Lucy Depp Settlement's hallowed grounds in Delaware County, Ohio. Established in 1835 by freed slave Abraham Depp, the Settlement was the first Black-owned farm in Delaware County. While the vegetables are grown and harvested at Lucy Depp Settlement, they are sold by B2MG2W members at the Powell Farmers Market in Powell, Ohio, a suburb just north of Columbus.

"In the summer, the farmers market runs every Saturday morning from late May to late September when the young people return to school," Seward said. "We probably sell \$300 a day in vegetables. And our mentees just don't sell vegetables. They sell the program."

Seward said the young program entrepreneurs are paid a salary for their experiences with the farmers market. However, 100 percent of the proceeds from the vegetables sold go to an

investment club the youth are starting. In the fourth quarter of 2023, under the guidance of Charles Schwab, a full-range financial advisory corporation, the young people will be taught how to operate the investment club successfully.

Seward, who currently serves as the organization's development officer, also has the perfect background to help guide young gardening entrepreneurs in their business endeavors. Before retiring, Seward was the senior operational executive for JPMorgan Chase and Huntington National Bank. After Seward retired, he was a financial services consultant at Client Solutions LLC in Dublin, Ohio, for over a decade. He is currently the outreach director for the Honorable U.S. Congresswoman Joyce Beatty (Ohio 3rd Congressional District).

Seward's passion for empowering young people through mentoring and community engagement is evident in his words and actions. He is an original board member of B2MG2W, along with Lonnie Myles and Claude Bailey. Other board members are Annie Marie Garraway and Michael Ducksworth.

Seward believes since the beginning of B2MG2W 12 years ago, the organization has reached and impacted approximately 2,000 young people. He adds that all activities and events facilitated by the organization are free of charge to the mentees and their guests, including parents, guardians, and friends. Yet, Seward recognizes the importance of finding and keeping excellent, motivated, and dedicated mentors to achieve the mentoring program's sustained success to powerfully make a difference in young lives.

"I've been a part of Boys to Men, Girls to Women since I was in the third grade," said Gene C. Sutton III, now 19 and attending North Dakota State College. "I didn't have a father around at the time I started as a mentee but being a part of the program gave me a mentor in Mr. Lonnie Myles. His support as a male role model helped me a lot."

Sutton said through the mentorship program, he was introduced to the worlds of entrepreneurship, gardening, stocks, money management, speaking confidently, and learning about various careers.

"I am not sure if I would have gained this knowledge without this mentoring experience," said Sutton. "I am grateful for my time with the B2MG2W mentoring group."

Seward said many other success stories are associated with mentees, who are currently enrolled or have graduated from the B2MG2W program. Yet, the organization is planning to do even more.

"We have not done a lot of solicitations for funds and have stayed away from government funding because of the controls on those funds," said Seward. "We have relied on donations from individuals, churches, and private organizations. However, we are preparing to launch a campaign to raise funds to help us continue to do more for our young mentees in Boys to Men, Girls to Women."

To learn more about B2MG2W, visit www.B2MG2w.org.

