

We Matter Now - Learning to Feel & Receive Love –A Space for Black & Brown Boys

Growing up in the foster care system wasn't always easy for Dondrea Brown. Something he really longed for as a young boy was to have opportunities to interact with adult mentors who supported, guided him and made him feel like he belonged.

This unfilled need is what today has driven Dondrea to do something about supporting young Black and Brown men. By partnering with local community members and the Grand Rapids Neighborhood Match Fund, Dondrea has launched a conference for high school aged Black and Brown boys.

The conference seeks to provide opportunities to access workforce development programs, financial literacy, and mentors.

Some of these topics are topics Dondrea says he never even had access to think or talk about with adults when he was growing up.

"I knew that being in the system, the only thing I was in was survival mode. The only thing I could really think about was how I was going to make ends meet," he says. "What we want to do is show our students that we are here to support and can relate to them."

But for Dondrea, it's more than just access to information and resources – it's about making the boys at the conference feel seen and loved.

"I will say I typically didn't hear people speak in positive affirmations to me. I remember when my grandfather did for the first time when I headed off to college. It was one of the most awkward things that I experienced because I wasn't used to that type of love or support," he explains.

For him now, the conference is about giving the students the opportunity to feel these emotions early on and to help guide them in changing the narrative of how others perceive them to be and how they perceive themselves to be.

Confidence of self, vision for life, and meaningful decisions are the guiding principles of the We Matter Now conference. These principles explain how Dondrea helps create the kind of community they want the youth to emulate.

"We want them to be able to have a vision for their life and see and encounter things that they don't usually see," he says.

The conference held in the Spring of 2022 invited 75 young Black and Brown boys from the area to participate. Many of these participants live in the 49507-zip code in Grand Rapids.

"We didn't attempt to serve a lot of students because we wanted to take time to build lasting relationships with the students we were serving and help them succeed," he explains.

While the conference was a single day event, Dondrea says his team will continue to follow with summer programming to offer opportunities of further engagement.

"And be a part of our initiative for the next three years," he says. "We really want them to take away the learning opportunities and take them back to their communities, families and their classrooms."