

Alchemy

Mythology, fairy tales, drumming guide boys

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He and guest speakers offer lessons on sacrifice, perseverance and making the right choices in life.

"I want to teach them to understand life through stories," Scruggs said. "To see the character traits of the heroes. The things the hero does. And take those traits and apply them to life."

Stories with a message

The idea for Alchemy was born several years ago, when Scruggs was working as a counselor with high-school dropouts. A young man yelled: "Kwame, tell us another story."

A light bulb went off with that young man's request.

"I knew that was the ticket," Scruggs said.

He had learned from working with adolescents that if "you tell them you are doing this or that wrong, they will become defensive." But if you tell them a story "and they see what's happening," the message of the story sinks in.

Scruggs, who is working on his doctorate in mythological studies at Pacifica Graduate Institute in California, has used mythology for many years in his work as a counselor and consultant.

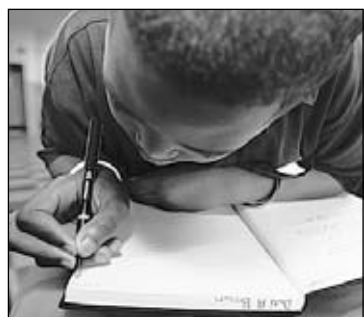
In 2001, he founded Alchemy Inc., a nonprofit organization that has received more than \$400,000 in grants from foundations and other organizations. In 2004, the program began helping sixth-grade boys at Perkins.

Now about 35 students - 19 sixth-graders and 16 seventh-graders - regularly attend Alchemy. The seventh-graders meet after school on Mondays and Wednesdays and the sixth-graders, on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

At the start of this school year, there were 50 boys in the program, but some have moved to other schools, while others have stopped attending. More



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Reaching out to boys

Sixth-graders wearing Alchemy T-shirts take part in the after-school program at Perkins Middle School. At left, David Brown, 11, writes in his journal.

lege - ideally on full scholarships.

His boys will meet at Perkins as long as they are enrolled there. Scruggs has not yet determined how the groups will continue when the boys move to high school.

Once the drumming ends, the boys' journals are taken out. In them, they write down quotes that Scruggs offers to them. These quotes are aimed at getting the boys to think long-term and to understand that sacrifice is needed to succeed.

"I am trying to ask them to ask the deeper questions in life," Scruggs said. "The one major theme is sacrifice. They know they have to make a sacrifice."

One common theme the boys know by heart, and they repeat it along with Scruggs: "Where you sit in your old age is determined by where you stand as a youth."

Believing in future

In the circle, Scruggs beats his drum and tells a story. He asks the boys whether there is something in their lives that they wish could be fixed.

One boy says he wants to not hang with the wrong friends. He

tells of being at a store with friends when someone stole something. The boy says he was suspected of being a thief, even though he took nothing, and was told he could not go back to the store.

"One little mistake can change your whole life," Scruggs says. "You have to keep that in mind."

Scruggs asks the boys whether they are thinking of what their lives will be like later.

"When you think, 'down the road,' how far down the road do you think?" he asks.

One boy says that means 18 or 21. Another says down the road means 15 or 16.

Nearly in tears, Scruggs tells the boys how much he cares for them and that he wants to be there for them as they grow up.

"I know each of you guys can make it," he says. "I believe it."

'Every parent needs help'

Sam Hill, a 13-year-old seventh-grader, said he feels calmer in school because of Alchemy.

"We've learned more stuff than anybody else," he said.

His father, James Hill, appreciates what Scruggs is doing for his son and the other boys.

"I can't teach him everything," Hill said. "Every parent needs help."

Twelve-year-old sixth-grader Tyrell Butts said he can feel Scruggs' care and concern.

Tyrell began attending Perkins in the fall. After learning of the program, he found Scruggs at school one day and asked whether he could get into Alchemy.

"I want to be a part of this group," Tyrell said.

His aunt, Norma James, with whom he lives, said Alchemy is one of the highlights of Tyrell's life.

"He likes the fact that there is somebody (other than family members) interested in his life," she said.

With admission to the group comes responsibility, and Tyrell knows he has to keep up his grades to please Scruggs and stay in Alchemy.

"When I am taking tests," Tyrell said, "I think, 'This is for Alchemy. This is for Alchemy.'"

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Program founder finds 'ticket' to reach youth

By Jim Carney
Beacon Journal staff writer

G. Kwame Scruggs, founder of the nonprofit organization Alchemy Inc., uses fairy tales, mythology, drumming and mentoring to reach boys at Perkins Middle School in Akron.

Q: How did you come upon the study of mythology?

A: Through the reading of Carl G. Jung, I came across the concept of the collective unconscious, which led me to read Joseph Campbell and *The Power of Myth*, which led me to Michael Meade's *Men and the Water of Life*. Meade interpreted life through myths. After reading this, I knew for me, this was the "ticket" to reach youth.

Q: What is the most essential myth to you?

A: Different stories speak to me at different times. It depends upon what I am experiencing in my life at that moment as to which story resonates with me. As for the message, it usually boils down to sacrifice, perseverance, humility, a mentor, faith and a few other common mythological themes.

Q: How does storytelling and mythology help the sixth- and seventh-grade boys in your group now?

A: The use of stories distances the students from the event and allows them to look at their present situations from an objective viewpoint.

Q: What is your main goal with the boys?

A: I would like to see them all attend and graduate from college. Implicit in this is understanding the character traits of the hero and always thinking long-term.

Q: You have committed to stay with this group through college -



G. Kwame Scruggs

Age: 48.
Residence: Copley Township.

Employment: Founder and executive director of the nonprofit Alchemy Inc.

Family: Wife, Sabrina, and son, Imani.

Education: Graduated from Akron Central-Hower High School; bachelor's and master's degrees in technical education from the University of Akron; working on doctorate in mythological studies.

Background: Worked 15 years at Goodyear before becoming consultant and counselor at Oriana House, UA, Akron Community Service Center & Urban League and Child First Ohio.

more than a decade in some cases. Why?

A: To provide consistency, assuring them that they will always have a guide to assist them in their journey through life.

Q: Does what you have learned from working with these boys apply to schools in general and to how we teach young people?

A: In my limited opinion, it is archetypal material, so it speaks to everyone who is willing to listen.

Q: What story or myth seems to be the one the boys identify with the most?

A: The Water of Life story,

About Alchemy Inc.

Alchemy Inc. was formed in 2001 by G. Kwame Scruggs, who used mythology in counseling groups of boys and girls in Akron.

In the 2004-05 school year, the program was introduced at Perkins Middle School as part of Perkins Activities Central.

More than 25 after-school, weekend and summer programs are offered through Activities Central, with funding so far of \$3.5 million from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation for all the Perkins programs.

Vivian Celeste Neal, community liaison program officer for the Knight Foundation, said Alchemy got the foundation's attention because of the need "to address the low academic achievement and disruptive behavior of middle-school boys."

In addition to the Knight Foundation, Alchemy has received money from the Robert A. Kutz Foundation, the City of Akron Housing & Community Services Program, the Community Foundation Neighborhood Partnership Program and the Akron Community Foundation.

More information about Alchemy can be found at www.alchemyinc.net.

which I think is partly due to that being one of the first stories we discuss. This story also encompasses a few common mythological themes.

Q: And what is the essence of the message of "The Water of Life" story?

A: Asking for help when it is needed. Treating people with respect.

Q: Why is drumming a part of the routine and what do the boys learn from drumming?

A: Drumming started last year due to the boys taking an interest in it just from me playing while telling stories. . . . Outside of releasing energy, which adolescent males certainly need to do, especially after sitting in school all day, drumming also moves brain activity from the left to right hemisphere, which is more conducive for symbolic thought. They also learn to work as a team.

Q: The boys often talk about very emotional subjects. Can you talk about something that was said in the group that a boy may not have been able to say without the support of the group?

A: Many comments are made that I don't believe would be made without the support of the group. For instance, comments about their relationships and true feelings about their fathers is not normal lunch-time conversation. . . . By their own admission, they feel safe talking within the group. After hearing one another's stories, they have more compassion for one another due to understanding why a certain individual might behave in a certain manner.

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Wal-Mart chain reverses policy

Stores will now stock morning-after pills in their pharmacies

Associated Press

Officials of Wal-Mart Stores Inc. announced Friday the company will reverse its policy and stock emergency contraception pills in all of its pharmacies effective March 20, saying the giant retailer could not justify being the country's only major pharmacy chain not to carry the morning-after pill.

The announcement comes after Massachusetts last month ordered the world's largest retailer to stock the so-called Plan B pill, following a lawsuit by three Boston women against Wal-Mart.

Illinois also requires pharmacies to carry the prescription drug, and those are the only two states where Wal-Mart has so far stocked emergency contraception.

"We expect more states to require us to sell emergency contraceptives in the months ahead," said Ron Chomiuk, Wal-Mart's vice president of pharmacy.

Chomiuk said the company will maintain its conscientious objection policy, which it said is consistent with the tenets of the American Pharmaceutical Association. The policy, except where prohibited by law, allows any Wal-Mart or Sam's Club pharmacy employee who does not feel comfortable dispensing a prescription to refer customers to another pharmacist or pharmacy.

The company had previously said it "chooses not to carry many products for business reasons," but had refused to elaborate. A Wal-Mart lawyer in the Massachusetts lawsuit said the company did not believe that emergency contraception was commonly prescribed or within the "usual needs of the community."

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