

a guiding purpose

Larry McKenzie, '80, knows what he was meant to do. A passion for helping kids achieve their potential.

BY MARK KINDERS, '93

For Larry McKenzie his avocation and his vocation are so closely aligned that the separation is a virtual blur. His life is devoted to instilling hope and pride in young people.

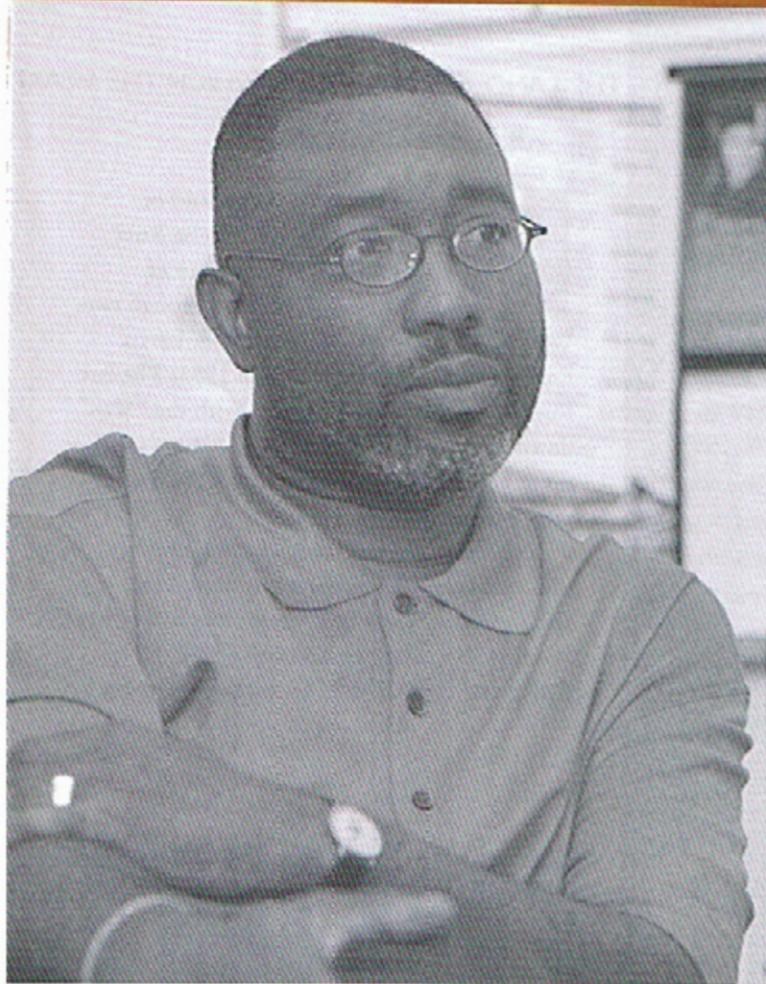
For the past two years, McKenzie, who is a 1980 political science graduate and former Falcon basketball player, has served as executive director of the faith-based Hospitality House Youth Directions in north Minneapolis.

Each school day some 80 to 100 youngsters from kindergarten age through high school stop by the center. Many of the elementary children are enrolled in an after-school educational enrichment program primarily for kids who have fallen behind in their studies. Under staff supervision they focus on reading, writing and mathematics in programs that have specific measurable outcomes for success. On Friday nights up to 90

teenagers participate in midnight basketball in the center's gymnasium where they play buckets interlaced with "power talks" about appropriate community activities.

During the summer some 270 youngsters are enrolled in camps that include football, basketball, volleyball and tennis. The track program most recently sent more than a dozen qualifiers to national meets in Eugene, Ore., and Omaha, Neb.

McKenzie, who is a hands-on leader in the two-story, brightly colored center that sits on a residential street, also is involved in extensive outreach into the surrounding neighborhood where he lived for 15 years. He is a frequent visitor to junior high and high schools for outreach activities working with gang members. Each year he touches the lives of some 1,400 young people.



in life

drives his community service...and his life.

And he adds that a major portion of his time also is spent fundraising to keep the nonprofit house afloat. That is a significant task in a weak economy, he says. But he notes that the house continues to receive donations and equipment and is close to turning the corner. "We are grateful for what we get," he says.

All of his efforts are driven by the center's philosophy of ministering to young people and encouraging them to show respect for others, to speak for themselves, to listen, to avoid putting down others and to take personal responsibility for their lives.

For McKenzie, the route to his volunteerism started with a caring family in his birthplace of Miami and continued through his years at UW-RE. Initially a journalism major, his world view was changed after enrolling in sociology courses taught by

"MY PURPOSE IN LIFE IS TO WORK WITH YOUNG PEOPLE. I LOVE KIDS AND I LOVE TO FIND WAYS TO HELP THEM. IT'S A SPECIAL BLESSING WHEN GOD PUTS YOU INTO A POSITION TO INFLUENCE THE LIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE."

— LARRY MCKENZIE

Professors Robert "Doc" Bailey and Robert Pionke. Visits to depressed neighborhoods, the Stillwater Prison and other locations "influenced my wanting to help."

After he graduated he worked with Big Brothers/Big Sisters for six years and then entered the private sector. For the past several years before coming to the center, he worked as the urban director with Youth Frontiers, working in schools on character education to teach young people the intervention and mediation skills needed to confront bullying and other behavioral problems.

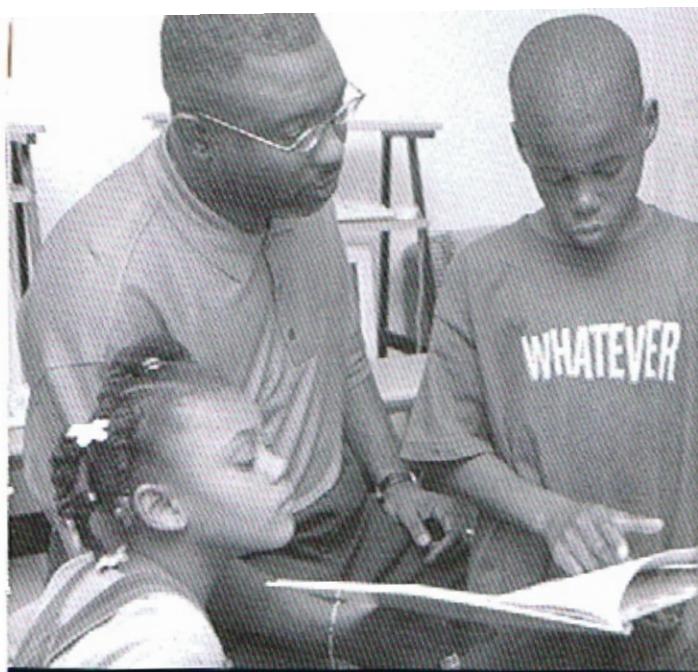
He was brought to Hospitality House two years ago to help rebuild the ailing 44-year-old community resource.

Although his return to the nonprofit sector is a recent phenomenon, McKenzie's volunteerism is a passion that goes back more than two decades. It has included everything from coaching elementary school sports teams, to volunteering as a T-ball and basketball coach with Minneapolis Parks and Recreation, to coaching church youth groups, and to serving as coach for the North High School and Patrick Henry High School basketball teams.

Add to that his service on the Hennepin County African-American Young Men's Project advisory commission, a massive project that seeks to reverse the debilitating trends of unemployment, incarceration and dropout rates among 18- to 34-year-old men. McKenzie also serves on the board of directors for a federal Empowerment Zone that seeks to revitalize the economy of North Minneapolis.

Mix into this his past service with the Metropolitan Council Minority Issues Advisory Committee, board service with Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Greater Minneapolis, and the North Community YMCA.

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Larry McKenzie helps kids with their reading skills at Hospitality House Youth Directions in North Minneapolis.

LARRY MCKENZIE

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As the volunteer basketball coach for the Patrick Henry High School basketball team, he's led the players to an unprecedented four state championships in six years.

He speaks most fondly of what those 12 young men each year have accomplished off the court. "Every young man has graduated to go on to some form of higher education, whether it is a vocational school or a university. Eleven of those kids have signed to play basketball with Division I schools. I'm more proud of those young men and what they have done than of winning those titles," McKenzie relates. "Ninety percent of them are African-American young men from single-parent homes. I have become more than a coach to them. I am almost a father to some of them."

His decades of service have provided a host of accolades for his community service: recognition with a KARE 11 Eleven Who Care award; an Everyday Hero award from KTCA public television; and the Minneapolis Park Board's Volunteer of the Year.

What pleases him most?

"I can see the benefits of my work. I love my work. A lot of people go through life and they don't know their purpose. To work with kids is my purpose. The compensation is not that great, but your pay is when you watch young people walk across that stage when they graduate, or when they get out of gangs and turn their lives around.

"That's the greatest reward." ■