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## City court terminates mentoring

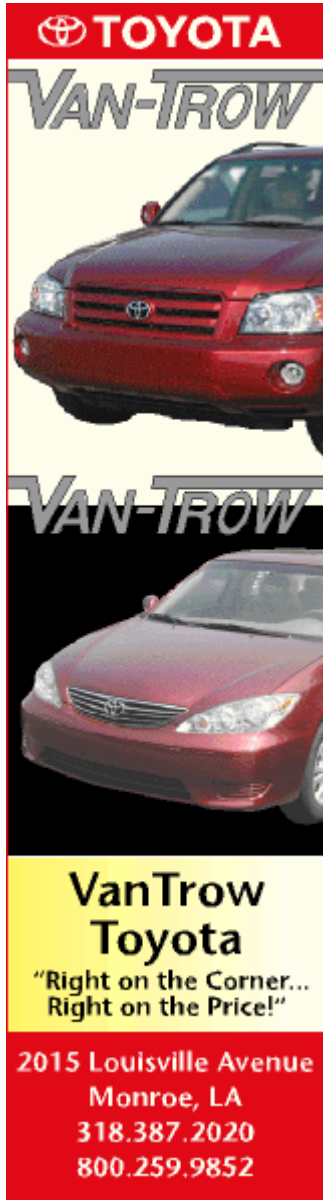
By Elizabeth Fitch

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For six years, the Rev. Christopher Handy said he dedicated himself to running the Monroe City Court Mentor program.

As director, he organized field trips, meetings, weekend activities and etiquette classes, routinely spending his own money to benefit the at-risk youth the program targeted.

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But in November, just weeks before its Christmas banquet, the program was suspended. Two weeks ago, Handy said he was told the program was terminated, and his services no longer needed.

"It was very beneficial, because (my son's) attitude changed," said Isabel Powell, whose child was in the program for two years. "He started getting interested in his school work. Most of all, he started behaving for me."

Why the program was shut down remains a mystery. City court officials reached by *The News-Star* declined to explain, citing privacy in personnel matters.

Judge Fred Amman acknowledged that the mentoring program had been suspended, but did not explain further.

"There are some things we've had to deal with internally," he said. Amman said he wanted to determine if he was legally permitted to speak on the matter. A telephone call placed to his office Friday morning was not returned.

Calls to judges Larry Jefferson and Tammy Lee were not returned. Internal memos obtained by the newspaper indicate the court leadership had concerns about issues ranging from insufficient insurance to improper use of grant funds.

Handy claims the program was unfairly targeted because of personal hostility against him.

What is clear, parents say, is that a positive aspect in their children's lives was abruptly taken away without a sufficient explanation.

"Now they're just floating along," said mentor Valerie Rowley. "They're just scattered. There is no one to lead them."

Rowley not only volunteers but had three grandsons go through the program.

The mentoring program had a rocky history when Handy took over as director in 2001. Started in 1994 by then-Judge James Garland Smith, a 2000 audit report noted questionable check-writing practices, prompting an investigation by state police and the Louisiana Commission on Law Enforcement.

Handy said he brought organization with him. He had participants fill out paperwork, such as medical history and emergency contacts, and set up outings and tutoring sessions.

"We have helped hundreds and hundreds of kids and families," he said. "We have kept kids out of the judicial system."

In 2006, Handy secured a \$40,000 grant from the state Office of Youth Development, dedicated to helping children remain drug free. The grant was renewed the following year.

But letters dated Nov. 16 and Jan. 23 from Clerk of Court Koyne Smith indicate there were problems. The letters state that Handy was not using the funds according to the terms of the grant and did not have proper documentation evaluating the program's goals.

They also shows he did not submit an annual report, and some of the children involved were too old, according to grant mandates.

"You bound the court to a second grant term without properly concluding or documenting any records for the previous grant term," Koyne Smith wrote on Jan. 23.

Other problems cited in letters from Koyne Smith include a lack of annual background checks on mentors and failure to meet required insurance coverage, which she wrote placed the court in danger of liability.

Handy said he had expanded the program beyond the terms outlined in the OYD grant. He pointed out that funding was renewed for a second year.

He questioned why the insurance issue was never raised earlier in the 13-year program. Handy said he checked on insurance quotes and believed the court could have used discretionary funds for additional liability coverage.

Handy offered a number of reasons why the mentoring program might have been disbanded.

He said he and Koyne Smith failed to see eye-to-eye on it.

He said he supported former Judge James Garland Smith in a recent run-off against Jefferson, who won the seat.

He said he cannot understand why the court did away with something that helped so many kids.

"If it was personal with me, get rid of me," Handy said. "But don't shut down the program."

Handy said now he is looking into starting another mentoring program outside City Court. He said he wants to continue to help the children he has served for years.

Parents like Rowley, Powell and Jeanette Brown, whose child participated for two years, said they want the program back and will follow Handy if he starts it elsewhere.

"The president talks about 'No Child Left Behind,' " Powell said. "These were left behind. The (court) left them behind because they shouldn't have stopped the program."