

May 15, 2010

## South Shore Drill Team pulls together in tough times

Economic issues threaten group that has offered home and hope to many youngsters for 30 years



Members of South Shore Drill Team perform at the 3rd Annual National Train Day Celebration at Union Station, Saturday May 8, 2010. At right, Rodney Nelson finishes his routine. (Abel Uribe, Chicago Tribune / May 7, 2010)

By Lolly Bowean, Tribune reporter

6:09 p.m. CDT, May 14, 2010

Coran Smith thought he was destined to die in the streets or in prison, he says.

As a South Side teenager in the 1990s, Smith had frequent run-ins with gang members, rebelled against his mother and authority, and often ran from police as he sold drugs or stole cars.

The one constant was his commitment to the South Shore Drill Team. He loved the attention, camaraderie and respect the group got in the black community. The team eventually motivated him to get his high school equivalency diploma and on the right path.

"The team taught me how to be a man. How to set goals," said Smith, 31, now pursuing a master's of divinity degree.

The team has taken children far from their drug-infested streets to places as far away as Morocco. It put sequined-covered uniforms on their backs, wooden rifles and flags in their hands and molded the predominantly African-American children into a disciplined performance troupe.

On the eve of the group's 30th anniversary celebration, it is in financial crisis and could soon run out of cash, officials said. Donations and performance fees are down and grants from foundations and philanthropic groups did not come in as leaders had hoped, said Sara Vlajcic, administrative director of the nonprofit organization.

As a result, the group has fallen about 20 percent short of what it normally needs to operate: \$1 million. In recent weeks, it laid off four members of the staff and cut other

costs. Still, that hasn't been enough to make up for the \$200,000 that didn't come, Vlajcic said.

"We've been trying to do more with less," she said. "One way to cut costs is to cut the number of kids we serve. We don't want to do that."

Now the organization is hinging its future on a major performance scheduled next month. For the first time, the annual fundraiser is being held downtown instead of in the Greater Grand Crossing community where the team is based. Organizers hope that holding the performance at the Chicago Theatre will draw new supporters and a larger audience.

"Our kids come from challenging environments, and the drill team is their second home," said Dennis Langdon, chair of the drill team's board. "I'd hate to think of the possibility of reducing services while our streets are running rampant with violence. So I'm worried about selling tickets. We need the money."

Some of the children, ages 9 to 21, pay about \$10 a month to participate in the activity. Most join for free.

Founded in 1980, the South Shore Drill Team is a fixture at summer parades and festivals. Team director Arthur Robertson believes that hours of spinning fake wooden guns can stop kids from using real ones.

"We offer these kids a safe haven," he said. "We try to show them something different. If they need a job, we'll give them a job. If they need a bus pass, we'll get it for

them. If they need a meal, we'll get them a meal. Whatever it takes to keep them off the streets."

Robertson, a former elementary teacher in Chicago public schools, boasts that although the group is made up of children from violent neighborhoods and broken families, 99 percent graduate from high school and many go to college. The children have to bring in their report cards and prove they are maintaining passing grades.

"We not only attract the kids, we keep them engaged," he said. "The longer they stay with us, the better of a chance we have to get them through school."



Long ago, Robertson developed a system for training so many children. He breaks them into smaller groups and, using a military-style ranking system, appoints team leaders. The leaders teach their sections. They also have to tutor their group, help each other with homework and serve as informal peer mentors.

At a recent practice, a group of about 40 girls stood as still as mannequins.

Anthony Whitney, 16, rehearses at Gary Comer Youth Center.

When prompted, they waved their pink, yellow, green and white flags, tossed them to the air and spun them around like helicopters. Then they slammed the flag poles onto the floor, holding the bar steady while tossing their hips from side to side.

"The drill team keeps me on my feet," said Ashley Peterson, 19, who joined when she was 12. "The team



keeps my spirits up and keeps me off the streets and doing nothing."

The organization has given Triana Page, 16, a way to see other parts of the country.

"My mother tells everyone I'm on the drill team," she said. "It's a good experience."

Coran Smith knows the benefits well.

With only three credits left in his senior year at Chicago Vocational High School, Smith dropped out. Even at Lincoln's Challenge Academy boot camp he gained a reputation for unruly behavior.

But he never stopped showing up for drill team practice. When the other kids started calling him a "dropout" and a "loser," he went to Robertson and asked for help finishing school.

"I didn't show it, but I was furious inside," he said. Robertson helped him enroll in a basic skills class at Olive-Harvey College. After he obtained a GED, he got a bachelor's degree at Columbia College. He works full time at the CTA.

"(Robertson) always told us we could have what we wanted; we just had to work to get it," said Smith, who still volunteers as a coach with the group. "It was not just about drilling, it was about getting life skills."

While administrators and board members fret over the money issues, Robertson dismisses it as nothing new. The team has grown from a makeshift crew of his relatives, when he paid for nearly everything out of pocket.

"I don't focus on the money end," he said. "I'm not worried because it's nothing I've never encountered before. ... Our focus has to stay on the kids."

[lbowan@tribune.com](mailto:lbowan@tribune.com)

Copyright © 2010, [Chicago Tribune](#)



Top left, Keith Jones, 12, rehearses at Calvary Community Center. Kevin Ray, Assistant Director, talks with a group after rehearsal. (Photos by William DeShazer, Chicago Tribune / May 1, 2010.) At right, Jade Dryer, 15, performs at National Train Day Celebration at Union Station. (Photo by Abel Uribe, Chicago Tribune / May 8, 2010.)