

## **BADD turns into good**

**March 11, 2010**

Four young black men laid down a rope in the middle of a hallway at Richland 1's Middle College for lessons in history, trust, collaboration and reality.

"We encourage every young man to have a personal board of directors," Robert Kirton, founder of the nonprofit Black Achievers Determined to be Different, said. "Step on the line if your mother is on your personal board of directors."

All four high school seniors - Adrian Price, Quinton Clark, Elijah Johnson and Aaron Fountain - stepped on the line. But when Kirton asked if their fathers were on their personal board of directors, three stepped away.

"Now step on the line if you know someone who is in prison," Kirton said. All, including Middle College's student success coordinator and BADD coach Kelly Simmons, stepped on the line.

Later, they formed a circle with the rope and performed an exercise called Coming to America. Some were enslaved, others remained behind, one was thrown off the boat.

"You know, we were stacked six deep when we came over so why do we have so much black-on-black crime?" Kirton said.

Those questions - about the absence of black fathers and the alarming rates of crime and incarceration among young black males - are at the heart of the BADD challenge program, which Kirton founded in 2002 as a way to encourage young men to take charge of their lives.

It is that same crisis that brought three black Methodist denominations to South Carolina last week to devise a plan to aid black males ages 5 to 25.

Kirton believes his program, already on the ground in about 25 public schools and some churches across the state, could provide advice and expertise to the leaders of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. The three denominations plan to establish Saturday academies and link with historically black colleges to encourage planning for higher education and careers.

"We want to collaborate with them," Kirton said.

At Middle College, a charter school partnership between Richland 1 and Midlands Technical College, the nearly 30 young men who are part of BADD meet weekly and regularly participate in community outreach, including mentoring elementary and middle school students.

"It's like a magical mirror," said Johnson, who ran with a bad crowd until he had a run-in with the law and began to turn his life around. "You can hold it up to any child and see what they can be."

Johnson, 18, has already started a woodworking business and plans to attend Midlands Tech for two years before enrolling at Clemson University in mechanical engineering.

Quinton Clark's mother implored him not to associate with troublemakers, but it took BADD, "where everything is a challenge by choice," to show him that he was not laying a foundation for success.

"My mama kept telling me this was not the crowd I was supposed to be hanging with," he said. "I got in some trouble, and I regret that."

Now, Clark said, he is advising his godbrother to avoid the mistakes he made and planning for a career as a builder.

"Now that I am a changed person, I think I can go back to my old community and change people," he said.

Adrian Price, 17, said he simply had a bad attitude toward life, a grudge he carried at Lower Richland High School until he joined BADD at Middle College. Now, he envisions a career in international law at either USC or Winthrop University, and he hopes to maintain a hand in theatrical productions as well.

After many family moves and attending eight high schools, Aaron Fountain found a brotherhood and a purpose at Middle College and in the BADD organization.

He just won a \$20,000 Horatio Alger college scholarship for his efforts to overcome adversity and will put that money toward his college education at Winthrop University.

On Monday, he put his faith and reliance on his BADD brothers as he participated in a trust exercise. Fountain crossed his arms and fell back into the arms of Kirton, Simmons, Johnson, Price and Clark as they then lifted him up high and then slowly lowered him to the ground.

"How was it?" Kirton asked.

"Terrifying," Fountain said. "I'm afraid of heights."

But there was a lesson there: Be part of something larger than yourself, build a brotherhood, put your trust in larger things, plan for a successful future, Simmons said.

"If you can broaden your perspective on life ... then you can wake up with a purpose in life."