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LOCAL PROGRAM CELEBRATES MEN AND WOMEN WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Anytown, State—Jack Smith is an accountant by occupation, but one afternoon a week he's busy changing a young boy's life. Smith is one of 36 men and women who will be honored on Friday, June 23, 2006, for their work with Cook County's Stepping Stones Mentoring Program. The ceremony will be held from 7–9PM at Jahnsen Auditorium, 421 Main Street.

The 8th Annual Stepping Stones Mentor Awards offer an evening of celebration, reflection, and commendation for a job well done. According to an independent evaluation by Jackson University students, Stepping Stones has a significant impact on the middle school students who participate in the program's one-to-one mentoring and tutoring services. The youngsters do better in school; are less likely to use alcohol, take drugs, or join a gang; and have improved attitudes about their future, their peers, and their family.

Through the program, volunteer adult mentors meet with youngsters for an hour each week for a minimum of one year. The meetings, which alternate between school sites and community locations, offer meaningful educational, recreational, and developmental opportunities. All youngsters attending Thomas Jefferson and Bertrand Russell Middle Schools are eligible for the program, but most participants are referred by teachers, counselors, parents, or Cook County Youth Services workers.

As the school year winds down, Stepping Stones brings volunteers, youth, parents, and community leaders together to recognize the program's success, thank participants, and build awareness of the ongoing need for mentoring in our community. "This is my favorite night of the year," says Program Coordinator Dennis Wakeland. "The youth in our program have achieved so much with the help of our mentors. It's a wonderful thing when a life changes for the better and it's very important that we celebrate these accomplishments."

Innovative prizes are part of the celebration, with awards for Mentor-Mentee Match of the Year, Longest Lasting Match, Most Creative Match Project, and Biggest Academic Improvement. "It's always tough to pick a winner in some of these categories. Last year our Match of the Year had organized a neighborhood cleanup and worked with City Hall to increase funding for the anti-graffiti task force," says Wakeland. "Our 'most creative' category went to a pair that restored a '57 Chevy, sold it at auction, and donated more than \$5,000 to a Katrina relief fund. These volunteers don't just help the kids; they help the kids help the entire community."

Nicole Martin from Frontier Bank, a major sponsor of the program, will be the keynote speaker at Friday's ceremony. "We consider Stepping Stones a great investment: they're helping build successful citizens in our community," says Martin. Techmo Systems, a local technology company that provides mentors, has donated more than \$5,000 in prizes to the volunteers and youth. Catering was contributed by Rhonda's Bistro. Rounding out the festivities will be the smooth jazz stylings of the Mike Garringer Experience.

The Stepping Stones Mentoring Program is a collaboration between Cook County Youth Services, Inc. and the Cook County School District. The program was founded in 1998 by two AmeriCorps members who added mentoring to the afterschool services at Thomas Jefferson Middle School. A 2004 U.S. Department of Education grant provided funding to increase services at Jefferson while also expanding the program to Bertrand Russell Middle School.

Stepping Stones has served 275 youth through one-to-one mentoring relationships, with 130 matches currently active at the two program sites. Volunteer mentors come from local businesses, religious institutions, colleges, retirement centers, and civic organizations. Stepping Stones also uses volunteers to assist with recruiting mentors, coordinating community outings, and organizing group events.

For more information about Stepping Stones and the difference we're making in the community, visit www.stepsstonesmentors.com.