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Youth of the Year had to be man of the house

By Michael Williams

Tevonte Grant has traveled an accelerated course from boyhood to manhood. Born to a teenage single mother, Grant lost his father for most of his childhood to a 10-year prison sentence. When he was 8, his mom encouraged him to attend the Boys & Girls Club in their Blue Ridge Estates neighborhood off Midlothian Turnpike in South Richmond.

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Born to a teenage single mother, Grant lost his father for most of his childhood to a 10-year prison sentence.

When he was 8, his mom encouraged him to attend the Boys & Girls Club in their Blue Ridge Estates neighborhood off Midlothian Turnpike in South Richmond.

He became determined to assist his mother, Tenisha Grant, a nursing assistant, in providing for their family. He handed money from his fast-food job to his two younger brothers. He further helped provide for the family's everyday needs with money earned through summer internships at CarMax.

"He has really taken on the role of being the man in the house," said Sean Miller, vice president of operations for the Boys & Girls Clubs of Metro Richmond.

That sense of responsibility extended beyond the home.

Tee, as he is known, helps younger kids at the club with their homework and teaches them dance as a tool to resolve conflict.

His role as a man among boys led to his recognition as a youth among boys. Grant was selected as 2010 Youth of the Year by the Metro Richmond Boys & Girls Clubs in February and by the Boys & Girls Clubs of Washington and Virginia last weekend.

Grant, 18 and a senior at Richmond's Open High School, bluntly expressed in an essay the role the club played in shaping him.

"The club saved my life in every way," he wrote.

The awards come with a combined \$18,000 in scholarship money for Grant, who has been accepted by his first-choice school, James Madison University. In June, he'll move on to the regional Youth of the Year competition in Atlanta.

Grant had competed twice for the Junior Youth of the Year award and learned a valuable lesson.

"This time, I wasn't so much focused on winning as getting the judge to understand who I am," he said.

And who is he?

Grant -- quiet but confident with a quick smile -- thought a beat before answering.

"A strong, determined young man who has dreams and goals and wants to accomplish them for his family and inspire others," he said.

Grant belongs to a hip-hop dance troupe called UNITY that performs at schools, block parties and community events. He wants to become a choreographer and open a dance studio for underprivileged kids.

He also loves math and could pursue a career in technology or computer science.

The Youth of the Year competition included essays and an interview involving difficult questions.

"I got emotional when they asked me about my father and the male role in my family," he recalled.

Grant has watched peers land in trouble or in prison. During an interview Thursday at the Boys & Girls Clubs' Harrison Street center, he vowed to be an example to follow -- not a statistic to lament.

"It does the Boys Club well to know we create new cycles," said area Director Todd A. Elliott.

The cycle, of course, involves too many single parents, at-risk children and impoverished homes in the black community. It's heroic but sad when children are pressed into adult service. We need fewer Youths of the Year and more Men of the Year.

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