

## Robert Neal, Jr.

Robert Neal, Jr. has been nurturing and mentoring children and youth of all ages in the Miami Valley for more than 25 years - first as a teacher at Miami Valley Child Development Centers and then in Catholic schools throughout the area. Later in the 1990s, Robert continued his dedication to making a difference in the lives of children as a minister of music for Christ Cathedral in Clayton, and finally since 2000 at Daybreak as an Outreach and Prevention Specialist.



Mr. Neal graduated from Warren High School in 1971 and was educated at Central State University in early childhood education. He began his career as a professional rhythm & blues singer and entertainer traveling Europe, Japan, Hawaii and the USA. But his love for children compelled him in 1980 to enter the field of teaching where he could realize his dream to work with troubled teens in his own town. The combination of his love for teens and his ability to capture an audience with a commanding presence and melodic voice made him a highly effective role model and a powerful force for inspiration and hope.

In 2000 the mutual interests on behalf of teens between Daybreak (a not-for-profit regional youth serving agency offering a full continuum of services for homeless, runaway, throw-away and at-risk youth) and Mr. Neal happily came together. In his role as Outreach and Prevention Specialist, Mr. Neal was instrumental in implementing the Power Club curriculum, a 10-week anger management program for high-risk youth that empowers youth to take command of their own lives through responsibility and healthy choices. The 10-week series is conducted in Montgomery County schools and

community sites such as teen centers, Juvenile Court, neighborhood centers and churches. It focuses on helping youth make better choices with a specific emphasis on developing non-violent conflict resolution skills. The club also educates youth about peer, dating and family violence.

Each year, Mr. Neal touches the lives of literally hundreds of Miami Valley youth whose troubles threaten to derail their future. Youth on the verge of incarceration, school suspension or expulsion and those whose personal and family lives are filled with chaos, violence, poverty, mental illness, drug addiction or other hazardous barriers. By reaching out to “troubled” youth day in and day out, Mr. Neal has unselfishly dedicated himself to a unique niche in our community. Historically the plight of teens “at-risk” is largely hidden, deep in recesses of their homes. Their only visible symptoms may be their disruptive, anti-social, aggressive or unhappy behavior leading to more victimization or ostracism at the hands of their parents, their peers and the system. They become identified as “problem youth”. Many adults are reluctant to accept the difficulties inherent in working with youth whose surface attitudes and behavior is unacceptable, challenging or even downright rude. But Mr. Neal sees a different child underneath the prickly quills of the teen’s protective defenses. And it is to that child that he reaches out. Once he makes contact he grasps the very essence of that youth’s potential and yanks it to the forefront, often succeeding in rescuing a teen that would otherwise tread a dangerous path toward self-destruction.

***“Robert takes all the skill he has gathered from his years of travel and education and then weaves in his personal touches of tolerance, acceptance, love and understanding. He doesn’t see the edgy exterior that is projected everyday as a defense against the angst of life; he chooses to see the strength and the will to survive and then show the youth how to use that to a better advantage than the edginess that existed prior to meeting Mr. Neal.”***