

Best 2015 arrival



Natasha Henderson, Barry Allen and their new son, Lucas Allen. | MICHAEL SCHMIDT/SUN-TIMES

She and Allen, a landscaper, also have two daughters, 11 and 1, and a son, 8. The family lives in Woodlawn on the city's South Side.

Adding Lucas to the mix of birthdays and holidays means "I got to do a lot of landscaping this year," Allen said. And dad had a message for Lucas,

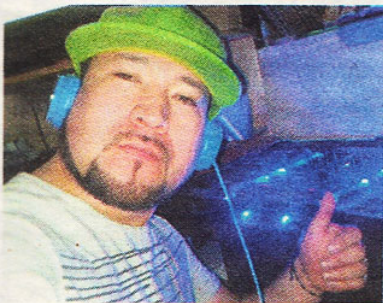
who faces a lifetime of birthdays surrounded by New Year's Eve partying:

"Sit down, son," he said. "None of that!"

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killed in hit-and-run



Aimer Robledo | PROVIDED PHOTO

sion, police said.

Robledo was pronounced dead at 3:37 a.m. at Mount Sinai Hospital. His death was ruled an accident.

Ibon Hernandez said her uncle's oldest daughter, 9, has taken Robledo's death particularly hard. His youngest, 8, is "still trying to comprehend what's going on," she said.

But Robledo's wife is "devastated."

"Her two girls don't have a father any more," Hernandez said. "She doesn't know what to do."

Family members are calling on anyone with information about the hit-and-run accident to report it to Chicago Police.

The crash ripped from them the man who would often play DJ at big family parties — including its recent Christmas party — and who could liven up the room "when everybody was sad or the party was pretty down."

She said her uncle was "always smiling." Never did she see him angry.

"He was a good person," Hernandez said. "When you needed help, he was there to help you."

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||| NATIONAL MENTORING MONTH

Program helps girls open doors

BY EMILY HOERNER

While programs like President Barack Obama's "My Brother's Keeper" bring national attention to the plight of disadvantaged African-American boys, one Chicago nonprofit is focusing on improving the lives of their female counterparts.

"There has been a lot of statewide and federal aid and attention centered on African-American boys," said Kelly Fair, founder and executive director of the Polished Pebbles mentoring program. "But I think people are starting to realize that the same crisis is happening with African-American girls."

Twelve percent of African American girls are given out-of-school suspensions each year, a rate substantially higher than other races, according to a 2014 report by the U.S. Department

of Education. Studies suggest suspensions can lead to lower academic achievement and increased dropout rates.

Fair, a native of Chicago's South Side, said she founded Polished Pebbles five years ago to help improve girls' communication skills and connect them with career opportunities.

"What helped me become more confident is that I always got mentorship because I worked," said Fair, who previously worked at nonprofit organizations.

To offer a similar experience to girls like her, Fair said Polished Pebbles provides a number of mentorship opportunities on weekends and after school for girls between 7 and 17 years old. The participants are mostly low-income girls living in the city's affordable housing properties.

More than 1,000 girls have participated in the program

since it started.

"It's building them up and letting them know their value," said Brittney Shepherd, a Polished Pebbles mentor and school program facilitator.

Shepherd works with small groups of students after school, discussing such topics as appropriate ways to communicate online and job readiness, and even setting up job shadowing days at places like Bloomingdale's and Nordstrom.

"You have some young ladies that . . . before, didn't talk at all," Shepherd said. "Then [they] go out to our stores and our partnerships, preparing for future careers."

Mentee Tianna Smith, 16, joined Polished Pebbles last year. The University of



Tianna Smith

Chicago Woodlawn Charter School student said she signed up because she often found herself talking back to adults.

"Before Polished Pebbles I was suc-

ceeding academically, but my attitude wasn't up to par," she acknowledged. "It has become better now."

Now, Smith is busy preparing to take the ACT and researching where she might want to attend college. She said she hopes to get a job at Nordstrom, where she got a behind-the-scenes look at what it's like to work in the men's shoe department through the mentor program.

"A lot of people don't get to experience things like that," she said.

This is the first in a series of articles being produced through a partnership between the Chicago Sun-Times and the Illinois Mentoring Partnership. Emily Hoerner, the author of this story, is a graduate student at Northwestern University.

Learn more about becoming a mentor/mentee by visiting the Polished Pebbles website at www.polishedpebbles.org.