

# SunSentinel



By [Frederica Wilson](#)

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This week I received a 100 percent rating from the Humane Society, which scores members of Congress on legislative issues related to threatened and endangered species.

It made me think, not for the first time, that if there was an endangered species list for human beings, the top category would be boys and men of color. They are seriously at risk, and in too many communities around our nation, more money is invested in incarcerating young boys than in saving them, and too many schools have become prison pipelines.

For nearly a quarter century, the 5000 Role Models of Excellence Project has served as a pipeline to success. I founded this unique, in-school mentoring program after noticing during my tenure as principal of Skyway Elementary that the one thing a group of boys all had in common, besides getting in trouble, was the lack of a caring and trusted adult male in their lives. It became my mission to fill that void.

Since then, I have witnessed countless miracles, starting with the men in our community who swiftly and selflessly stepped up to serve as mentors. Making the transition from boy to man is difficult under the best of circumstances, but with our role models as their guides, tens of thousands of boys for whom the future was once bleak have graduated from the program with the confidence that they can achieve anything they set their minds to.

Participating in the role models program has been especially valuable for boys who have difficult home lives or are facing other challenges. There are now 101 chapters in Miami-Dade County public schools, and 10 and 65 chapters, respectively, in the Duval County and Pinellas County school districts. We have awarded millions of dollars in scholarships. Every boy leaves the program ready for the workforce. We have sent thousands of them to college. Others seek some form of post-secondary certification or register in our firefighter academy.

For them, anything is possible, a message that is regularly reinforced through meetings with some of the nation's most prominent black men, such as President Barack Obama and Georgia Congressman [John Lewis](#), who had one of the most famous mentors — Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The leadership of Dr. King and Rev. James Lawson, Rep. Lewis says, "brought me out of the cotton fields of Alabama, propelled me all the way to Capitol Hill, and it has kept me here all these years."

Over the years, the boys have not only built lasting, trusting relationships with their mentors but also each other. "It's like a fraternity, a brotherhood," one student recently told me. "You help one another reach a common goal, which is to feel secure in life, and once we leave high school and are no longer a mentee, we become a role model to someone else."

January is the month during which the nation recognizes the power of mentoring, but just as it takes a village to raise a child, mentoring should be encouraged and celebrated every day. That's the best way to help ensure that boys and men of color do not literally become an endangered species.

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