

## **Peter Bug Shoe Academy, a program that offers part-time employment to urban youth.**

### **OVERVIEW**

John "Peter Bug" Matthews is a man with a trade, with dignity, and with a mission, according to articles in the *Washington Post* (1997, mid-September) and *The Boston Globe* (1997, September 21). His neighborhood is Southeast Washington D.C., and he is a 48-year-old teacher at Phelps High School. But he has also run the Peter Bug Shoe Academy since 1977, where ten of his students find part-time employment each year. Matthews also sponsors special events in the neighborhood, like festivals with games, rides, and treats. On top of that, he does street work, walking home kids he finds hanging out too late.

Matthews' shop and academy is a leaky building with a huge assortment of shoes. Customers get no tickets—he matches faces with shoes. This practice is a symbol of the importance of relationships he passes on to his students. His nickname comes from an old Volkswagen (The Bug) he keeps tinkering with and drives.

Because he stuttered as a boy, a teacher advised him to learn a trade. So, he did study a trade (shoe repair), but added to that a degree in sociology and anthropology. Before then, his stuttering had disappeared.

With encouragement I could have spent less time in remedial classes...You have a lot of time to think when you stutter because people don't have the patience to talk to you...I said, 'Well, I'm going to come up with a place where people can go and get everything they need to be a successful individual and a productive citizen.'

Over the years, John Matthews has taken many kids off the streets, helped some out of the criminal justice system, set up summer employment programs, and taught nearly 500 students. During the 1970s and 1980s, there was funding for his programs. Most of that has now dried up, so Matthews has to get by with an occasional gift and his own money. Customers pay only for materials at the shoe academy.

"In the glory days, we had 12, 13 kids in here all the time," says Ernest Rivers, who was once a kid in Matthews' program, and now runs his own pickup and delivery shoe-repair out of the same shop.

Stadford Brown, 10, is one of his present students who appreciates working with Matthews. He says, "When I learn to repair shoes, I can make my own money." He also plays quarterback for a team Matthews coaches.

It's clearly people like Stadford and Ernest who matter most to Matthews.

If I get a boy that's in the 5th grade, I'm gonna check on him all the way through high school. I'll check with the principal...You become a surrogate father. It's consistent. There's no clock. You do this 24 hours a day.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

1. What do you like most about this article?
2. What is the heart of urban and all youth work? What characteristics of good youth work do you find here?
3. What do you learn here from this story about community, stuttering, employment, street work and follow-up?
4. What are the main lessons for urban youth workers and programs from this article?

### **IMPLICATIONS**

1. The neglect of the U.S. capital's inner city is sad; its people have been the victims of political maneuverings and compromise. Youth work is vitally needed here.
2. This is the heart of good (urban) youth work: a compassionate and persistent lover of kids. He worked hard to establish a program that merited funding, worked with that funding, and then persisted without it.

3. These young folks are fortunate to have someone who lives in the neighborhood, works in the neighborhood, and cares for the neighborhood. We should note, however, that there are limits to a one-man program and would hope this could be expanded without losing its heart.

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