

Laura Bush talks up mentoring in Portland

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Brent Wojahn/The OregonianPortland

Trail Blazers center Greg Oden sits with First Lady Laura Bush during her appearance at a regional Helping America's Youth conference in Portland on Thursday.

First Lady Laura Bush urged a Portland audience Thursday to get involved as mentors for children, particularly boys being raised without fathers.

"Every caring adult can make a huge difference in the lives of young people," she said. "Young people want us in their lives, and they need us in their lives."

Her address at the Portland Center for the Performing Arts was part of the sixth and final regional conference organized by the White House to promote her pro-mentoring program, Helping America's Youth.

Bush arranged to be introduced by a local luminary: sidelined Blazers star Greg Oden.

Oden, who was raised mainly by his mother after his parents divorced, told the crowd that mentoring by a childhood coach and the head of the local Boys and Girls Club helped make him who he is. The 20-year-old NBA player exhorted the crowd to keep helping "us young kids."

Attended by about 150 mentors, educators and youth, the conference highlighted the work of several Oregon programs that help guide young people toward adulthood, including [Friends of the Children](#), Committed Partners for Youth, [Open Meadow](#) alternative schools and the Blazers Boys & Girls Club .

Bush also talked up the local information, e-newsletters and other support for adults who want to get involved in mentoring available at the Web site www.helpingamericasyouth.gov.

Shantel Monk, a junior at De La Salle North High School in North Portland, scored a photograph of herself with Bush, Oden and Gov. Ted Kulongoski.

Monk, who was born to a low-income single mother, was selected to speak by the White House because she is poised beyond her years when she talks about the influence that her foster mother, Helen Pittman, and Big Brothers & Big Sisters mentor, Theresa Tran, have had on her.

And she already has absorbed the message the conference was designed to drive home: Although only 17, Monk already has signed up to become a Big Sister to a younger girl.

While visibly awed by Oden, Monk said afterward she was even more wowed by Bush, with whom she chatted back stage. "She told me she's proud of me," she said.

-- *Betsy Hammond*; betsyhammond@news.oregonian.com

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