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  Gregory Castille, 17, a senior at Waltrip High School, helped launch the Peers Mentoring Peers program.
Tim Johnson: For The Chronicle



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Waltrip senior aims to help his peers

Gregory Castille coordinating orientation for sophomores, mentor program

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Gregory Castille remembers what it was like the first day he set foot in Waltrip High School, 1900 West 34th Street.

As a new ninth-grader, he was intimidated by the sheer size of it.

"Our school has three floors, about six different wings, and you have no idea what to do or where to go first," said Castille, now 17 and about to start his senior year. "They give you a little map, but if you're not good at maps, that's not going to help you much."

For the 2007-08 school year that starts Aug. 27, Castille and approximately 50 of his junior and senior friends are personally going to help the sophomores.

Castille, an Acres Homes resident who transferred to Waltrip for its research and technology program, helped create Waltrip's Peers Mentoring Peers program last year and will remain president of the program for this school year.

The idea behind the PMP program, Castille said, is that sophomores are less likely to quit school or fail classes if they don't feel so overwhelmed upon entering a new school, and have someone to look up to; someone who has been there, done that.

One of the first events PMP will host this year is "Fish Camp" on Aug. 16 — basically an orientation for incoming sophomores.

Once school is in full swing, Castille and his fellow mentors will visit classrooms twice a week, teaching character-building lessons, playing games and just hanging out.

But turning a good program last year into a great one this year requires a little cash, for things like open houses, prizes as incentives and mentor training.

That's why Castille is thrilled he, along with the help of PMP advisor Dr. Sabrina Norman, was able to secure a \$500 grant from Plum TV based in New York City and Do Something, an Internet-based organization.

Plum TV is a national network that produces programming about America's most unique cities and towns. Do Something is a nonprofit Internet company that inspires young people to change the world.

Cynthia Conwell, School Improvement Facilitator at Waltrip, wrote in her grant request letter that Castille's efforts to launch and maintain a viable PMP program deserves recognition.

"Greg has been instrumental in leading the program with his enthusiasm and commitment to both the ninth-graders and Waltrip High School," she wrote. "I have seen him work tirelessly."

Castille is quick to shy away from his accomplishments, insisting there would not be a PMP program without the help of several others.

"In no way am I the only person that helps run this," Castille said. "Everyone, we all work together to make sure this group is running as smoothly as possible."

His mother, Wanda Thomas, said Castille has always shown tremendous leadership skills.

"He's always been active in church, and that has given him a lot of background on how to help others," said Thomas, a member of Sunlight Baptist Tabernacle, 6319 Laura Koppe. "He helps both the children and the elderly."

For more information on Plum Grants, and to see more about Waltrip High School's Peer Mentoring Program, visit www.dosomething.org.