

MENTORS

the non-parent connection

..... by Lori Danello Roberts

Mentor Erik Kirk meets weekly with Theodore Roosevelt Bryant



Photo: Lori Danello Roberts

“How many times have I told you ?” This preamble might as well be tattooed on the forehead of every parent. Oh, sure, we all take an oath to not pass along such trite adages, and yet, inner forces repeatedly take over and out it comes. Why? Because, try as we might, parents are forced to reiterate requests and recommendations over and over and over because our children simply cannot hear us.

You see, long about age 10, children become immune to their parents’ advice, and the only remedy is having the astute guidance come from someone other than ourselves.

It’s a conundrum, really. Should we feel ecstatic or exasperated that concepts finally sink in when someone else espouses identical ideology? It kinda feels like when you spend 5 minutes loosening the cap on catsup

bottle only to have someone else get the glory of the final pop.

Seriously, though, parents are obviously their child’s most important teachers, but there are many things children learn best from others—big brothers, teachers, grandparents, neighbors, family friends—anyone willing to consistently show interest and share insight with the emerging individuals. The problem arises, how-

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Mid-year training session schedule can be found at www.leon.k12.fl.us

ever, when a child does not readily have access to someone who can focus such time and energy. This is when one of two things are at risk of happening:

1. The child begins to feel isolated, frustrated, and dejected, eventually perceiving themselves as being someone undeserving of positive attention.
2. The child turns to undesirable peers for support (often those in need of support themselves) leading them down the wrong path.

This is why mentors (people willing to make a small commitment to a child who needs access to a positive role model other than his parents) are so very important to our educational system and to our society. Mentors can be exceptionally powerful influences that can literally change a child’s life.

“I didn’t have a big brother to talk to when I was growing up,” says Erik Kirk, Leon County School mentor and president of Kirk Consulting Group, Inc., “and I know how I could have used someone to talk to. This is what inspired me to become a mentor.”

Five years ago, Kirk and some of his colleagues answered the call-to-action by then Governor Jeb Bush for state employees to become mentors.

“We walked into the room at Riley Elementary School where students recognized as being in need of support had gathered,” he remembers. “I immediately figured, as

the biggest guy in the room, I would be the last one these kids would want to be matched with.” Kirk is 6 feet, 3 inches tall, which was probably intimidating for these already somewhat apprehensive 3rd-graders.

When Theodore Roosevelt Bryant’s name was called, he tentatively made his way to Mr. Kirk. “I was very scared,” Theodore recalls. It wasn’t Theodore’s idea to be assigned a mentor and, he says, looking back, if he were given a choice, he very well might have declined. “I am so glad I did it, though,” he says. “I would have missed out on a lot.”



Pictured here is Theodore Roosevelt Bryant when he first entered the mentoring program, with Governor Jeb Bush, who launched the Governor’s Mentoring Initiative in 1999 that ultimately matched Theodore with his mentor, Erik Kirk who was at that time a state employee.

Theodore and Erik (Mr. Kirk prefers Theodore call him by his first name) have been meeting on a regular basis for more than five years now.

“We meet weekly during the school year,” says Erik, “Sometimes things come up and we have to miss our week, but I really look forward to getting together.”

Erik has followed Theodore, who is now in 8th grade at Raa Middle School, to four different schools. With each move, Theodore had to establish new relationships, so having the unfailing connection with Erik provided a sense of security.

They both say their relationship has evolved over the years. “He was pretty nervous and shy at first,” Erik says as Theodore nods his head and chuckles, “but not any more. He

has really come out of his shell.”

“When we first sit down,” Erik says, “we usually catch up on what’s been happening since we last met—family, school, friends, anything. Then, we usually go over homework or prepare for an upcoming test; but sometimes we just talk the whole time.” Erik says he keeps in touch with Theodore’s teachers through e-mail so he is aware of particular subjects they should review. “But the most important thing about us getting together is the consistent connection and the camaraderie. He knows I am there for him anytime he wants to talk.”

“He helps me with my tests,” Theodore says, “I don’t think I would be doing nearly as well in school without Erik.” It is obvious that Theodore realizes the intent of this mentorship is to support his education, but when asked how he thinks of Erik, he responds, “I think of him as my friend.”

Heartwarming stories of mentoring relationships are everywhere. According to Betsy McCauley, district volunteer specialist for Leon County Schools (LCS), almost 1,100 people mentored last year.

“We treasure each and every one of them,” she says, “and we need about 4,000 more just like them to be able to match a mentor with every child who needs one.”

The reason for the short supply? McCauley says she continually has to educate the public that mentors don’t have to have a background in education to be qualified. “Anyone can be a mentor,” she says. Volunteers come from all walks of life—college students, those who never went to college, parents, non-parents, grandparents, government employees, judges, professionals ... “We even have a teen mentor program called Teen Trendsetters,” she says.

McCauley admits the most com-



Mentor Father Laughton D. Thomas meets weekly with Josh Stegall

Photo: ????????????

Mentoring

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mon reluctance is fear of the weekly commitment. "It's not as hard as you would think, though." Some of the busiest people are mentors. Governor Bush, who, himself, mentored weekly throughout his administration, instituted legislation that grants state employees an hour (paid) off a week to mentor or do any sort of one-on-one volunteering in the schools.

But it is not about being paid to volunteer, mentors share because they care.

Father Laughton D. Thomas, Rector at St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church in Tallahassee, is regarded as one such mentor who cares. Carmen Knight sings the praises Father Thomas and the positive influence he has been on her son, Josh Stegall, both academically and emotionally.

"I am grateful to him for caring about Josh," Knight says, with obvious pride in her voice, "My son must be a very special person for his mentor to believe in him and in his potential as he grows into a young man. For Father Thomas to stick with my son for these past several years tells me

a lot about this pastor, and tells me a lot about the worthiness of my son." According to Father Thomas, who is now an experienced mentor, Josh was easy-going and talkative right off the bat, but that is not always the case. "Each student has a different personality," he says. "Sometimes it takes longer for the boys to open up and really trust me."

Father Thomas has a gift for being able to reassure a person with trust issues that not everyone will let him down, a gift that serves him well as a mentor.

McCauley says everybody comes to the table with different gifts and different expectations for being a mentor. "We have a virtual cafeteria of opportunities," she says. "We try to match each prospective mentor with a program that best suits his needs."

When someone contacts the district volunteer office interested in mentoring, McCauley asks two main questions:

1. Are transportation and/or traveling across town issues? This is not uncommon for college students, older mentors, and those who are squeezing their hour into a very tight work day. "This way, I know to match them up with a school

close in proximity."

2. What age child are you most comfortable with? "There is a big difference between mentoring at the elementary level as compared to the secondary level."

Once someone makes the decision to get involved, McCauley says it doesn't take much to become a mentor:

- an hour-long training session,
- a FBI fingerprint screening (which is paid for by LCS), and
- a willingness to make the commitment to meet with their mentee once a week (during the school day, on school grounds, for 30 minutes to an hour, for at least 12 weeks).

"We say 12 weeks to accommodate college students, but we prefer mentors who live in town commit through the end of the school year."

Although McCauley coordinates mentor training from the district office, individual schools make the determinations as to which children receive mentors, based on what priority.

Criterion varies greatly:

- Some schools decide based on teacher/counselor referrals alone.
- Some schools give priority to students in specific grade levels established as critical years, like 2nd and 6th grades.

- Some schools allow each teacher to nominate, say, two students from her class.
 - Some schools focus on boys
- Regardless of the selection process, every mentee must:

- have signed parental permission and
- be receptive to the idea.

"We can't have children who have consistent discipline problems or are negative and uncooperative participate. That just wouldn't be at all fair to the volunteers who are going out of their way to meet them," McCauley says. In the event that questions or concerns arise, each school has a trained mentor coordinator who is available to support the volunteers.

Typically, mentors are matched with a different student each year, but every once in awhile, there is a "made-in-heaven match," as McCauley put it, and the mentor requests to stay with the child. Although she, in no way, expects mentors to make life-long commitments, McCauley says when a special bond like this is formed, accommodations to follow that child are certainly honored.

Erik and Theodore have formed such a bond, one they say will not end when Theodore graduates. "Our desire is to continue in this relationship," Kirk says. And after a short pause, he adds, "for the rest of his life." After reassuring glances toward each other and a "that's my pal" nudge to Theodore's shoulder, he tags on, "At least for as long as he wants me around." ❁

Leon County Schools is planning a recruitment campaign for the second semester, in which McCauley hopes to gain more volunteers. "Although I would love to find all 5,000 we need, I will be happy to recruit 500 more willing souls," McCauley says.

For more information about becoming a mentor, call Betsy McCauley at 487-7800, or visit www.leon.k12.fl.us, and click on "Community" and "Mentoring." Upcoming mentoring training dates will be posted online.

KidLit.kit

..... by Jan Godown (JG) Annino



I know several area librarians who, without a doubt, would be as bold as librarian Alia Muhammad Baker, if necessary. Baker is now known around the world for creativity and courage in spirited away from the central Basra library in Iraq, about 30,000 books. The texts included a biography of the Prophet Mohammad written in the 1300s, and recent volumes. Baker had worked developing the collection for 14 years.

After a government official refused her request to remove the books for safekeeping, Baker secretly began taking books when she left work at night, anyway. She accelerated her clandestine book-saving as war engulfed the region. With the help of a restaurant owner and his pals, she saved 70 percent of the collection, in an all-night, secret, "bucket brigade" of books. The library building and the remaining books later burned to the ground.

The Librarian of Basra is a prideful picture book sensitively written and illustrated by Jeanette Winters. Portions of the sale of the book benefit the Basra Central Library, through the American Library Association. The story is ideal for any age, but especially for children, who need to know the power of one individual's actions. After the book was published the librarian told Winter: "...one shouldn't surrender. This is my message." www.HarcourtBooks.com

When fewer words tell the story, when the words run around in a circle or pile up in a tower, when the words rhyme, fly, or give you a poke in the eye, chances are the words are in a poetry book. Here are a few to warm your winter days.

The Puffin Book of Utterly Brilliant Poetry, edited by Brian Patten across the

Atlantic., introduces us to contemporary British poets including Benjamin Zephaniah. He offers a two-page tribute, *For Words*, that includes: "Thanks for words that help me overcome/thanks for words that make me rap/thanks for words that make me clap/ thanks for words that make me smile/thanks for words with grace and style." www.penguin.com

For a change of pace climb into a London stagecoach for *A Visit to William Blake's Inn* by Nancy Willard, with illustrations by Alice and Martin Porvensen. In a picture book that won Newbery and Caldecott honors, Willard imagines Blake as an inn-keeper with an assortment of guests, including sunflowers that demand a room with a view. The clever tribute to the great poet is an any-ages read.

Finally, the celebrated work of poet and playwright Langston Hughes, with illustrations by Georgian Benny Andrews, is presented with great style in the the Poetry for Young People series entry *Langston Hughes*,

edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel. Included is the poem *Words Like Freedom*: "There are words like Freedom/Sweet and wonderful to say/ On my heartstrings freedom sings/ All day everyday." www.sterlingpub.com

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