

CLEARWATER BEACON

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Mentoring programs can change lives

By ALEXANDRA CALDWELL

CLEARWATER – Mentors come with different backgrounds, gifts and strengths, but “Every child needs a mentor,” says Susan Heath Ryan, outreach coordinator for Adults Mentoring Children.

There are numerous mentoring programs in Pinellas County, including Adults Mentoring Children through Gulf Coast Community Care, and Eckerd Youth Alternatives’ Early Intervention and Prevention Services mentoring program for children of incarcerated parents. Both programs agree that it is important for all children to have positive mentors and that there are always more children than there are mentors available. Both programs are based out of Clearwater.

Kids ages 4 through 15 may begin the Adults Mentoring Children mentoring program, and often these are kids who need a little extra individual time with a positive adult, Ryan said. Maybe they come from a single-parent home or foster care or a large family, she said, and just need some concentrated time with an adult to focus on them, the kid.

“(Mentors are) someone to listen to them,” Ryan said. “Someone to share their dreams and to share their problems with and to have someone outside the home.”

There are times growing up when kids do not get along very well with their parents, Ryan said, and a mentor can help by listening and reinforcing home values, she said. Often the kids are more willing to listen to the mentors

because they are not a parent, she said, even if the advice and values are the same.

Linda Feldman of Clearwater Beach has mentored a girl for 21/2 years through Adults Mentoring Children. Feldman still remembers the first day she met Lorileigh, now 11, who was waiting out in the yard to meet her new mentor.

“I get so much out of (mentoring,)” Feldman said. “She is just a gem. She is little miss optimist no matter what is going on. Her personality is such that she is always appreciative and upbeat and fun to be with. So I have learned as much from her as she has from me.”

In the beginning, Feldman’s goal was to instill good grooming habits in Lorileigh, such as brushing one’s teeth and hair regularly, frequent bathing, always have clean clothes and other good habits. To make this more fun, the pair had spa days where they got their hair done and had manicures and pedicures.

The ladies also enjoy outings to the movies or the mall. They have gone to the Lakeland air show, the production of “My Fair Lady” at the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center, and sometimes just going to Feldman’s house to bake cookies.

Feldman said she has loved watching Lorileigh grow in her self-confidence and manners and that she now sees that there is a bigger world out there.

“I see her blossoming into a young lady,” Feldman said. “She takes pride in her appearance now. ... (Mentoring) fills a space for me now that I don’t have little grandchildren around anymore. It’s just really rewarding to know you can positively affect a child.”

Mentoring benefits the whole community, not just the mentor and mentee, Ryan said.

“We’re all part of society, and even if we don’t have a child, the children are the adults of tomorrow,” Ryan said. “The children are the people who are going to make a difference in their lives as they grow up in society. What mentors do is, if they do a good job, this child is going to be a better citizen of society. He or she is probably going to do better in school, and that follows that they would do better in jobs down the road.”

Children with mentors are less likely to end up in jail or be truant from school, Ryan added, and they will be better citizens both now and as adults, she said.

Eckerd Youth Alternatives agrees about these benefits of mentoring, so it has a special mentoring program for the children of incarcerated parents.

“Studies show that 60 percent of kids with parents who are incarcerated are likely to go themselves, so we try to make interventions along the way for those kids,” said Jim Oliver, mentoring coordinator of the program.

The kids in the program are just regular kids, but one or more of their parents are in jail, he said. Often they live in supportive homes – whether with the other parent, an aunt or uncle, or a grandparent – but they could also benefit by having another positive adult role model in their lives, he said.

“I was a middle school teacher for 35 years,” Oliver said, “and I know that even if they come from a home with great role models, it’s so important to have mentors to have one more voice, one more set of suggestions, a different perspective. And it gives kids a chance to see someone doing it right. Someone doing things and living a life they might like to have.”

Some of the kids may be on the border of becoming a problem kid, with what Oliver calls the “teenage swagger,” but with a good mentor, Oliver has seen many of these kids turn their life around into a more positive direction.

The program is in year two of a three-year grant, said April Putzulu, communications manager of Eckerd Youth Alternatives. She said mentoring is the most cost efficient and effective way to prevent kids from getting into trouble later in their lives.

Pat Riley-Sanderson of St. Petersburg has mentored Laclea, 16, of Largo for a year through this program. Riley-Sanderson said she does not have children of her own, and she does not work with children through her job at

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CASA, so this is a great way to give back and be around kids. She and Lacleeta, more commonly called "Tiny," have grown close over the past year, she said.

"It is beautiful, I think," Riley-Sanderson said. "It gives the perspective of young folks, and when Tiny talks, I listen, and she teaches me about this generation."

Riley-Sanderson has learned how to text message because of Tiny, and Riley-Sanderson has offered Tiny worldly advice from everything from schoolwork to boys.

Tiny said she looks up to Riley-Sanderson because she is older and knows more than she does, and she likes getting advice from

her. It's important for teens like her to have mentors because it helps keep them on the right track and stay in school, Tiny said.

Riley-Sanderson said it makes the community a better place when people take responsibility for other people through mentoring, even if they are not their family or neighbors.

She has loved watching Tiny blossom in school, completing both eighth and ninth grade last year at Clearwater Intermediate. She made the honor roll every time, she said, and looks forward to starting Largo High in the fall. Tiny, herself, mentored a fifth-grader last year and is a mentor to her three younger sisters. Her

sisters are jealous that Tiny has a mentor, and they hope to get one of their own soon, she said.

It has been difficult to find enough mentors for the program, especially in north county, Oliver said. The economy has also made it difficult. Oliver said he lost between six and eight mentors this year due to lost jobs or means of transportation. To become a mentor for this program, one must be 18 or older and have never had a DUI or a felony. Training will be provided. For more information, call 348-7402.

To become a mentor for Adults Mentoring Children, one is recommended to be at least 30 years old, and everyone must fill out an

application form, undergo a background check and home interview, get fingerprinted and come to orientation. They are then matched with a child and there is an interview with the potential mentor and mentee, and after that, if all goes well, they are free to begin their mentoring outings, Feldman said.