

Hillary Carey

May 10, 1999

Community Literacy and Intercultural Discourse

What is a Mentor?

What is a mentor? I ask this question as if it has a simple definition, but that is far from the truth. This question cannot be answered in one sentence, not in one page. And even the question itself doesn't begin to represent the real questions I'm thinking about. After working with East End Youth Projects at Carnegie Mellon University for three years, tutoring middle school students from at-risk backgrounds, I learned a great deal about how to mentor. It wasn't until I entered Dr. Flower's class on Community Literacy, however, and conducted an intercultural inquiry on the subject, that I truly understood the dynamics of the mentoring relationship. I was forced to examine my motivations and my expectations, as well as those of other mentors and the teens that we work with. This exposed me to many facets of emotions with which both parties enter the mentoring relationship.

I first began to question the dynamics of the mentor/mentee relationship after reading Scott Goodrich's inquiry "Five O'clock World." Scott has been a friend since I began working with him at East End during my freshman year. He was there to help me through my first semester tutoring and offered me the opportunity to get more involved with the East End organization. He and I shared a passion for righting the wrongs we saw at Reizenstein Middle School every Friday afternoon. He shared with me his knowledge of the suffering school system in Pittsburgh and fueled my dedication to the kids I was working with. His inquiry paper was especially interesting to me because I had met the tutee he calls "Bobby" at Reizenstein and had watched that relationship develop. In Scott's paper he describes the importance of male mentors for male teenagers, but also hits upon another dynamic: Black mentors for Black teens. This has been at the back of my mind since I began tutoring the inner-city kids.

Black mentors for Black teens?

For me the racial difference is a benefit of mentoring. I appreciate that the cross-cultural relationship teaches me about a culture that I have never been exposed to. It is a first-hand study of a lifestyle that I never was close to. But is it really what is best for the teens? I worry that they would have a better relationship with someone with the same background. This intercultural discourse-crossing might be a luxury that an at-risk teen cannot afford. Scott writes that "the impact is strongest and lasts longest when examples are set by black males," because Black teens are immediately able to identify with such role models and their struggles for success. When Scott asked whether he could be a role-model for Bobby, Bobby answered "I ain't white and I don't want to be white." The problems that inner-city teens face are sometimes very different from those that I have faced in my life. In so many ways my life has been easier than that of the teens in Pittsburgh's inner-city, so I fear that they cannot look to me for inspiration because my battles have been so different from theirs.

Working at the Community Literacy Center on the North Side has given me the chance to form a strong relationship with several teens, and to really explore the strengths and boundaries of our relationships. I have found that other strengths can make up for the differences in our backgrounds. Deonna and Diondra are both fourteen years old and are best friends. I was happy to see such a good, strong friendship between the girls, but it made it difficult to get work done. We split them up, so that I worked with Deonna and another mentor worked with Diondra. That lasted long enough for me to form a friendship with Deonna, and then Diondra joined us as her mentor focused on a more difficult teen. Both are very hard working students. Deonna was quiet one on one, but can be pretty loud with her friends, Diondra, Tiffany, and Brittney. When we began together, she would get right to work on our task. I had to slow her down to let her know that there was more than the workbook, I wanted to talk with her, about her, as well. She was still a bit nervous around

Rivaling Racism

Deonna and I talked about segregation in schools. It surprised me that she took the point of view of Black racism, the Black community wanting the segregation too. I had always thought of it as caused solely by wealthier Whites.

D: I don't really think they have a reason. They were taught when they were younger, or heard. Like, when we hear about gangs, how Black people were treated wrong. And then they hear their mom or something over talking with someone, and they might start to get an idea in their head and they start to hate. And as they get older they teach their kids like that, and that's how it forms.

H: Do you think you- or any of the other teens here have a problem with us as mentors from the university being primarily white?

D: I don't think so, I never really questioned it before.

Later, I brought it up again with Diondra, Deonna, and Tiffany:

Tiff: You know, I just noticed that last week!

Dd: Was it planned?

Dn: Yeah, to have us communicate better?

H: No it wasn't planned, there were no restrictions. Do you think that it makes a difference?

All: no.

H: Why do you think the schools are so segregated?

Dd: Because Allegheny is in a Black neighborhood and all the kids that go there are from that neighborhood.

H: Why are neighborhoods all Black?

Dd: I think sometimes White people is afraid to be around Black people 'cause they think that everything we do is, like, crazy. (to Tiffany) Like your one friend who thinks that if you walk on the Commons at night you'll get shot. (laughs)

Tiff: Oh, yeah! My friend- The Commons is so boring, ain't no body be outside! I mean...if you get shot, you musta been in somebody's way or something...

H: At school I was told not to go to the Mattress Factory at night because it's in a bad neighborhood. But it's right here, it's your neighborhood.

me when I conducted my first rival reading. I explained to her that the reason the other mentors and I came to the CLC was to find out what life is like for teenagers on the North Side. Because she is an expert on that subject I would be interested to talk with her throughout the semester about what that is like. Her comment was that she thought it was nice that we gave them a chance to show us that some of the things we might hear are not true. When I asked her what “stuff,” she said “You know how people said that there were gangs and stuff, coming here you wouldn’t see that, we took a different approach.” With that start, Deonna was ready to open up and talk to me about what her life is like. This inquiry provided her with a reason for spending her time talking to me, and it also empowered her, she had something that was valuable to me. She had knowledge that I wanted to learn.

Am I an outsider?

I gave Diondra an excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr’s letter to the officials in Birmingham:

I think I should indicate why I am here in Birmingham since you have been influenced by the view that argues against “outsiders coming in”...I was invited...I am here because I have organizational ties here. But more importantly I am in Birmingham because injustice is here...

I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny. Whatever effects one directly effects us all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial “outside agitator” idea. Anyone who lives in the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

I chose this reading to see if she felt that I was an outsider, and to be honest I hadn’t yet decided for myself whether I was or not. It seemed as though I was an outsider who had made it through the gatekeeper because I’ve passed the test. I was interested to see how she might apply his words to my actions. She was able to pull out the sentence: “I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham.” She asked “are there Black people in Birmingham too?” and went on to explain that King can’t only worry about the Black people being criticized in Atlanta when they are being criticized in Birmingham too. She was pretty happy with herself for coming up with that, and I was too. She didn’t take it further, though, so I asked her how that might apply to the mentors at the CLC, because we came to help with the problems that they have in school but did not go to the same schools that they go to. She thought for awhile and answered,

I don’t consider y’all outsiders because you came to help us, and you came to see what our problems are and to help us... I think it’s nice that you all came to see how we are, ‘cause there are a lot of bad things said, but you guys came to see for yourselves, and you see that we’re not [bad kids]!

I feel that her answer summarizes our mission as students of intercultural inquiry, but it may have been more of a regurgitation of what I had told her earlier about what I wanted to do. I wanted to find out how sincere her answer was. Too often teens know that the right answer is “everyone is equal.” I asked her who she does see as an outsider. Deonna talked about how someone from the North Side could be an outsider, “depends on how you look at it. But I think everybody’s the same, just from different places.” Again this sounded like a politically correct answer, but now that I know Deonna well, I’m pretty sure, that for the most part, she believes this, and she knows that differences cannot be generalized, as I was asking her to do. After more of a discussion she was able to say that if “they be tryin’ to tell us how we should act...but they don’t know how it is because they haven’t experienced the things we have to experience.” then someone could be an outsider. Again, I pressed her to tell me how that is different from what I am doing. She smiled and said “y’all just here to help us and try to figure out what’s going on, and stuff like that.” Because I was constantly talking to Deonna and Diondra about what was going on in their lives, asking about the North Side and Pittsburgh and the schools, I believe that they realized that they were helping me as much as I was helping them.

Diondra: Hey, do you have to worry about this: people who’s higher than you lookin’ down on you, and people LOWER than you lookin’ down on you, too!

H: What do you mean by that?

Dd: People will find something they don’t like about you - they’ll find anything bad to say about you.

H: Well, I think that’s more of an age thing. You know, when you are in middle school you haven’t really figured out who you are yet. You haven’t really established the type of person that you are so you let other people kind of push you around, and you let everything they say affect you. You know if someone’s not like you, you need to say something bad about them to make yourself feel better. But once you get older, like when you’re in college- I know what kind of person I am, and I know what I want to do, and if people don’t like how I am, I know that that’s their fault. And if people are better than me at something, I know that they are better than me at that, but not at what I do. So I don’t need to put them down for it. It’s just a matter of being able to do stuff for yourself.

Dd: That makes sense...I know one problem that we both can share- we could get jumped by anybody at any time. We could get jumped by some White girls or some Black girls- couldn’t you?

H: Mmhmm. But that’s not really something that I ever worry about. It never really occurs to me that I could get jumped.

Dd: Depends on where you go. Do you live on the Hill- don’t come on the North Side. You live on the North Side- go on the Hill and you get messed up. *(laughs)*

Tiff: *(laughing too)* All it takes is one girl then her whole reunion comes down to you.

H: Is that a problem for me though’. since I don’t live on the North Side or the Hill?

Dd: Well, it depends on what you say...If you say something that you think might not be offensive to them, then they’ll say “Oh that White girl she thinks she’s better than someone.” You’ll get jumped. *(she is still laughing)*

Dn: *(serious)* That’s what it’s about, they don’t like nobody who’s different from them. That’s all.

How do we deal with our differences?

Last week I called Deonna to see if I could take the three girls out on Saturday. They were excited and asked what I wanted to do. I told them it was up to them, so they decided to tour me around the North Side. Since I was able to get a car, we ended up driving to the North Hills and having dinner. They picked a restaurant that I had never been to before, and Tiffany was happy to sit in the passenger seat giving directions. We had a great time, and it was very comfortable. We even went to the mall. It meant a lot to me that they were willing to take me into their discourse, not thinking twice about cruising the mall with me in tow. We wandered through clothing stores and shoe stores, gabbing the entire time about boys- every time a White guy over twenty walked by they nudged me and teased me. They laughed as we walked with arms linked because I looked like one of them. They laughed because I was short enough to blend in, not because I was the only one who wasn't Black. They teased that everyone thought I was fourteen too.

It is my openness toward accepting the girls, and my honesty about our differences, that make the situations comfortable. I've spoken to people who worry that they do not have the qualities to become a mentor. I tell them that honesty will get you more than halfway. Don't try to fool anyone, it won't work. The differences in our backgrounds are there. We need to acknowledge it and learn from it, rather than pretend it isn't there, or try to blend in, "mushfake." Tiffany gets a laugh every time I have to ask what her slang means, but we both learn. In the car ride to the North Hills on Saturday we listened to my Ani DiFranco CD on the way there- they tolerated it, if not liked it a little bit. And on the way back they sang, at the top of their lungs, to WAMO- the R&B station in Pittsburgh. Neither of us was embarrassed to expose the other to our preferred music, although they were very different, and the tolerance came from both sides, out of respect.

How much can I expect?

I said that honesty and openness will get you halfway toward a successful relationship; other positive qualities will get you beyond that to friendship. Patience and caring bring in the emotional support and give you the motivation to work through difficulties that will always arise. My first semester tutoring at Reizenstein was a roller coaster. Antonio and I would make progress one week, laughing and learning, and accepting each other. The next week he would refuse to sit down, bouncing a basketball through the entire period. I was so hurt those days, leaving the school feeling as if I had been punched in the stomach because I had expected so much more. I would force myself not to dwell on it, somehow finding the energy to come back the next week with an open mind again. Things would go flawlessly and maybe a breakthrough would happen and he'd ask for my phone number, or mention that he had been worrying about what would happen when I graduated from CMU (three years from then!). Then I would leave with my faith in relationships completely renewed, already looking forward to next week. Energy and dedication are required for your own sanity, and innovation for your tutee's. When things get tired and dry, it is important to try a different approach because no matter how much respect there is in the relationship, it is hard for a teenager to sit still. Dr. Jennifer Flach, who has been an assistant teacher for the CLC class for five years, lists courage as a required quality. Courage to face the troubling situations, the hardships that the kids see everyday, the inequality in the school system, and because you are making yourself vulnerable as you care for these kids. Dr. Flach reminds us that "the other person always has the option to not form a relationship with you. . .to not come back." When a child doesn't come back, it is a hard truth to take. There are two lives involved and neither one of you has much control over your own circumstances, let alone the circumstances of the other's. It is not always your fault when a student doesn't come back, but it always feels like it is.

That is why your best qualities can only get you halfway there. The other half must come from the mentee. Dr. Flach continues by saying that the hardest part of mentoring is "realizing that you're dealing with another person who has ways of handling things on her own." There are expectations on both sides of the relationship, expectations about the qualities that the other person will have, and the commitment the

Motivations

H: Why do you think that people tutor?

Deonna: ummm, I really don't know... that way they can keep kids out of trouble, you know, if they talk to them, they can keep kids out of trouble while they are there, for the time being. They just might want to.

H: Why do you think they want to?

D: I really don't know.

H: Well, that's what I want to learn about, so think about it.

She is quiet.

H: There are a lot of things that I get out of it, what do you think some might be?

D: You get to meet different kids, more people and new kids. ummm, like being able to communicate with different people. *She is silent.*

H: How about right now, what am I getting out of this?

D: ummm, you're getting to know me, and...getting your questions answered...or umm, that's all I can think of off the top of my head.

H: Can you apply this [MLK letter] to why I'm here?

Deonna reads it over again.

ummm, like, again when he said- we can change this to say 'you can't sit in Massachusetts [Hillary's home state] and not being concerned with what happens in another place like Pittsburgh, or for example, the North Side, and umm...

H: Yeah, you're exactly right. It's something that I can do to help the problem right now. Do you think this is true [reading from the letter] "Whatever affects one directly, affects us all indirectly?"

D: ummm, the one, I don't know what year it was, but when Rodney King got beat, that affected all the other African Americans, because he was beaten. And what's his name? Johnny Gammert, he got beat too, and they had no reason. It affected everyone else, not just African Americans but everyone of every race.

other person will give. Rachel Knapp, a fellow mentor this Spring semester, sums it up well by saying that our expectation is that the teen “will accept what I’m willing to give.” Many of us expect more than that, we expect friendship, we expect gratitude, we expect to make a difference, and to see the difference we make. Is it fair to the teen to go in with such expectations? Is it fair to us? What happens when those expectations aren’t met? When mentors go into the program expecting big results, expecting the teens to be changed by the end, they can only be disappointed. This is unfair to the mentors and to the teens. Ideals are goals, but when negotiating a relationship with another person, you can only gain as much as the other person is willing to give.

Dr. Linda Flower, professor of the CLC class for ten years, and head of University Outreach, tells us that this negotiation is an important lesson to learn, “The role of a mentor...is far less clear (predictable or structured) than that of a tutor.” As a tutor the goal is set, it is an academic accomplishment. As a mentor, the role is far less defined and the path is unprecedented because each relationship is very different. In another inquiry “Responses to Uncertainty in Mentoring at the CLC” I learned that there has always been nervousness as university mentors approach the teens, and that this uncertainty is well orchestrated by Dr. Flower. A response from a director of the class to a suggestion for more structure in the relationships is “One of the worst things would be a clear agenda that would stamp out change and diversity.” She goes on to say “The CLC is purposefully designed to create a situation where the name of the game is to negotiate your relationship.” There is no way to predict how a successful relationship can be formed between two people. The most that can be given is a list of suggestions, ingredients that must be present for exchange. Another director of the program admits, “We try to create a ‘productive discomfort’ until everyone is beyond where he or she is normally comfortable. No intercultural learning can take place otherwise.” I agree that this lack of structure that borders on confusion, forces people to leave their discourse on campus. Once they are in the Community House, where things are unfamiliar, they form a new discourse that is built as a space where the mentor and the teen can co-exist. Dr. Flower addressed our class of mentors at the end of the year with this, “You were willing to make that enormously vulnerable move of caring for someone else and committing to a relationship when you can’t always read the signals of their esteem for you. I think that is often what intercultural crosswalking is all about,”

Do I have what it takes to be a mentor?

With that statement Dr. Flower addresses the difficulties of intercultural discourse being a two-way commitment. Another difficult issue is whether we each have the ability to make a connection with the other person. In our situation we were forming relationships with inner-city teens. As college students, most from middle class backgrounds, we were afraid that we would not have a common ground on which to meet. If that common ground is not found, the relationship will be uncomfortable at best and condescending or conflicting at its worst. Before she met her teen, one mentor wrote “I’m really apprehensive about how to start a relationship with my reader when we really have no common ground to begin with.” Although this mentor ended up finding that she had much more in common with her teen than she ever expected and formed a good relationship, many mentors have the same fears in the beginning.

In Marc Freedman’s book about mentors “The Kindness of Strangers” he talks about a wonderfully successful relationship between a homeless, fatherless, teenage boy and his mentor, an African-American man who is a doctor in Washington, D.C. Dr. Hogan describes his first attempt at contact with Sean through Mentors Inc.

When I first signed up for the program I got a piece of paper in the mail with Sean’s name and number on it. I dialed the number and the person on the other end said “CMS Shelter.” And I said, “Ah, oh, I’m sorry, I must have the wrong number,” and hung up. So I pulled out the paper again, looked at the number, and called back, and the person answered again, “CMS Shelter,” and maybe I said, “excuse me,” and hung up and tried one more time. Finally I said, “I’m trying to get in touch with Sean Varner,” and the person told me she couldn’t give out the number of residents, because I had reached a shelter for homeless people. She said, “Here’s the name of

Perceptions

H: what do you think that I get out of working at the CLC?

Deonna: You get your assignments done? *(laughs)*

H: Do you think that’s the only reason I’m here?

D: Was there, like, a list and that’s what interested you most?

H: Well, no, I mean everyone here chose to be here, and coming here, to the CLC is the main part of the class. So everyone here knew that they would be coming here and wanted to come here. So why do you think that is?

D: To get a grade, or to just to see that the stuff that you hear is true.

H: What stuff do we hear?

D: You know how people said that there were gangs and stuff, coming here you wouldn’t see that, we took a different approach.

H: You don’t think anybody here is in a gang?

D: Just from the people I know, I don’t think so. Some people I don’t know, but I don’t think so.

H: Why?

D: ‘Cause they don’t -people from a gang, they like to start stuff- that’s what I believe anyway. And the people here, they don’t say nothing to me, I mean, they know how, but they don’t start stuff.

H: Do you know anybody in a gang?

D: mmm,mmm. *(shakes her head)*

H: About how many people in your school do you think are in a gang?

D: I don’t think no one is in a gang: not that I know of. Not like, a group of people that goes around killing people, but maybe a group of people...a group of people. I don’t know, I don’t really know nothing about gangs.

somebody you can call tomorrow.”

I immediately called my wife and told her, “This is over my head. This guy lives in a shelter. I don’t see how I can relate to someone coming from that situation.”

Even this successful African-American male, whom most would describe as the ideal mentor for an inner-city boy, had apprehensions about being considered an outsider to his mentee. However, Dr. Hogan went into the relationship with openness and listened to what Sean had to say. Sean’s reactions to him are immeasurable, he was elated to have “someone to sit down and listen to me- to give me a chance to talk.” Sean describes the emotional stability that his talks with Dr. Hogan provide, because he can talk about the problems that he has and his mentor will listen without judgment. It is important for potential mentors to realize how valuable this can be to a teen. John, a mentor this spring, told me about his apprehension of being “good enough” to mentor a teen. He almost didn’t, until a friend convinced him that just giving time is giving something. Sean says of Dr. Hogan, “Out of everyone I know, John’s my best friend.”

What do the teens expect?

Teens can have as much apprehension as we, as mentors, have. They often control more of the commitment and exchange because we have made ourselves available to them. Therefore it is important to gain their trust, to break down the barriers that they put up as protection from strangers. They become just as vulnerable as we do once those guards are let down, and if their other networks of support are weak, the disappointment can be more devastating. My mentee, Diondra, was offended during one class when she worked with another mentor who fell asleep as she was talking to her. Diondra did not forgive her through the end of the semester. Apathy can be as detrimental to the process as negativity. Without effort on both parts, a relationship will not be formed. I spent one morning last month at Reizenstein Middle School, talking to Shaunte, an eighth grader who was willing to allow me to use her real name because I explained that the knowledge she had was valuable. It was only one session. I would not be able to work with her again. Still, after we finished her math homework, I was able to talk to her about the inquiry I was conducting and she was willing to answer some questions for me. Once again, this process of collaboration opened up our discourse and she began to talk more freely as she understood that I wanted to learn what she had to say. I asked her if she had people to turn to for support, she answered, “Yeah. There’s a lot of people. my aunt. my cousin. my mother. In elementary I had a couple teachers that would watch out for me.” I asked if she had that here in middle school, and she brought up the issue of trust,

I don’t know, I don’t really get real close to the teacher; so I can tell ‘em something. I can’t trust ‘em. These teachers is so neby. They’ll tell another teacher; then they’ll tell, then they’ll tell, then soon it will just be around the school. And the students will know.

I said to her “Sometimes some of the teachers seem like they don’t have a lot of time or patience.” She answered,

Yeah, like, [the counselor] one time, there was a problem, she did nothing. She didn’t even care. And she did NOT want to solve it. So then, me and a girl- we just end up fightin, and I still got suspended. Even though I told her before that I had a problem with her: She seems like she’s too busy- she don’t need to be a counselor in my opinion.

It was her counselor in Colfax Elementary School who did take the time to watch out for her that really made her feel her worth.

There was a mediation lady- I could trust her: She always watched out for -it was like, six girls that she always paid attention to- she always paid attention to everybody; but she really paid attention to us. She was nice- ‘cause somebody, there was somebody out of our whole school, somebody that really cared. There was the rest of the people- they didn’t really matter to me.

A post to our Mentoring Bulletin Board from a mentor during the second week of meetings at the CLC:

I really like what we’re doing so far, but I have a problem. Diana **will not** concentrate on what we’re doing, until today, it wasn’t bad. She kept getting up and walking away when I was talking to her. she even told me that she was sick, and wanted to go home. I think Gina said something to her, because she told me that she was feeling better a few minutes later. I don’t know whether I should just tell her to sit down and concentrate or what. I don’t want to be too strict, but it took us forever to get through what we had to do today because she really wasn’t interested. I tried to get her involved by directly asking her questions, but she answered with “I don’t know” every time. any advice?

Another mentor answers:

I saw what you meant today when we were working in a group together. Diana did seem really distracted and not interested in anything we were doing. I was wondering what she’s like when you work one on one. Does she talk more? Is she more confident in what she says? It almost seems as if having Diana and Torri (who are sisters) in the same group may be doing more harm than good. I noticed that every time Diana would get up, Torri would say something about her being slow or goofy. I’m not really sure how to address this, though. My thought was that, since Torri kept saying things about her, Diana might just be “doing what’s expected of her.” I wonder if it’s wise to have them in a group together.

The original mentor’s final reflection:

I went into this class with the vision of me as a perfect mentor beside my happy, eager, enthusiastic mentee. We’d talk about life and school, and she’d really look up to me. That was before I went to the CLC. In that respect, I learned that a mentor isn’t always the perfect vision that I held in my mind. Daniel didn’t love me, and I wasn’t always crazy about her, but I think we learned a great deal from each other. The teens at the CLC broke down nearly every stereotype that I had about inter city teenagers. They were so bright and motivated- nothing like the struggling, apathetic beings that we see in the media. I found their resolve and enthusiasm for life in general (though not always the work that we were doing) refreshing.

Who supports an urban teen?

Mike Rose talks about the desperate need for teachers to reach out to kids in his book “Lives on the Boundary.” There are so many things competing for attention in a teen’s life today, it takes work for a teacher to win out, but it is necessary. He writes of his own experience coming out of an at-risk situation into academic success, “Knowledge gained its meaning, at least initially, through a touch on the shoulder, through a conversation of the kind that [effective, caring teachers] used to have with their students. My first enthusiasm came because I wanted a teacher to like me.” Unfortunately anyone entering Reizenstein Middle School has probably realized that we cannot count on the teachers to make this connection. Many of the teachers there are exhausted and exasperated; they have lost the patience to deal with teen issues with the respect they deserve.

When the teachers don’t reach out, who does? Scott Goodrich’s story of his relationship with Bobby describes the difference a mentor can make. His first introduction to Bobby was his teacher handing over Bobby and a friend, saying “These kids are stupid, see what you can do with them.” He was infuriated that a teacher would say that in front of the kids and forged ahead with the relationships. The boys’ grades improved with Scott’s attention; they were smart kids in need of individual attention. I don’t know how many tutors, how many times have said “...but when I have him alone, he’s great.” I love that feeling, the reward of finding the goodness in a teen that has been unmanageable in the classroom. The change is amazing when you can give a child an individual voice. Scott was able to maintain the relationship with Bobby through three years at Reizenstein, until Bobby moved last summer without leaving a forwarding address. The story doesn’t end there, though. Scott has every quality of a caring mentor, and energy and diligence are no exception. Scott was relentless in pestering the Pittsburgh Schools until he found Bobby, living thirty miles outside the city. He kept in touch, seeing Bobby every other week, until his mother called Scott, nearly in tears. Bobby was on probation for running away from home, and his grades were C’s and D’s. Scott realized he needed to reposition himself in Bobby’s life. He began calling Bobby twice a week and driving out to see him every week without fail. Scott, once again, provided, what activist Milbrey McLaughlin would call a “consistent, reliable resource” in Bobby’s insecure world. Bobby’s grades improved and his relationship with his mom is much better. Recently Bobby and his mother moved to the North Side where Scott lives, so they see each other on a regular, almost daily basis. Scott proudly tells me that Bobby has the highest grade in his algebra class, and his other classes are A’s and B’s. Even more importantly, Scott was asked by Bobby’s mother to give the same support to Bobby’s friend. The three of them now hang out together, and all grades are improving. It hasn’t been a smooth journey for Scott, there were problems along the way, times when Bobby didn’t think he needed Scott, and times when Scott sacrificed time for Bobby or sacrificed time with Bobby. In fact I remember Scott being late meeting me for dinner because he had been driving Bobby around looking for his mom. But to hear the pride in Scott’s voice as he talks about Bobby’s latest accomplishment or the anger as he discusses the school system, it is clear that it has all been worth it. Every once in awhile, Scott gets a nearly direct “thank you” from the boys. Last night when Bobby said that he wanted his friend “to hang around with them so that you can do for him what you did for me.” Scott says, “that was all the thanks you could need in a lifetime.”

Although there are fears to face and vulnerability to overcome, the emotional benefits far surpass the drawbacks, in mentoring relationships. Both the mentor and the mentee learn so much about themselves as they actively learn about another person. Whether you become a mentor to encourage academic growth or to fight against a devastated school system, the rewards are self-growth and the satisfaction that you have given something of yourself to someone in need. With the proper tools: honesty, openness, and caring; anyone can begin to build a relationship with a child in need. When you are fortunate enough to have that child care back, the opportunities to change the life of a child are a profound power to hold.

A post from a mentor to the CLC class Bulletin Board:

I titled this post “suggestions,” but I really don’t know if I have any. All I know is that I feel pulled in many different directions. I have stated in prior classes that I was concerned with out motives as mentors. I didn’t want the teens to feel like guinea pigs or like they were being “observed,” so that we can study discourse and difference.

a response from another mentor:

I do understand and empathize with many of the concerns that she spoke of. I guess I wish that in two days a week I could give these kids a voice, but what I’m really finding is that they’ve already developed one and my job is to fine-tune it so that other people will listen.

A post from a frustrated mentor:

I think that we have overlooked perhaps the most fundamental issue with the mentoring process. I don’t understand how we are supposed to make a connection with a teenager that we have virtually nothing in common with. The conflict with Jason and Pierre really rubbed me the wrong way. Also, I read through the syllabus and found that we are supposed to call our mentors on the phone. This whole scenario is really overwhelming to me, especially since my people skills aren’t the greatest in this type of situation (ie: being thrown together with a total stranger). I think that we need to learn how to cope with possible differences of opinion, etc. that might occur. I’m really apprehensive about how to start a relationship with my reader when we really have no common ground to begin with.

Scott Goodrich answered my email about why he is a mentor:

From the very beginning I think I understood that what the kids really needed was a lot of support from someone they could trust. My first year with East End was great and I learned a lot. I saw the program making a difference for kids, one that couldn’t be measured with statistics or computer models.

Mentoring is a very difficult undertaking, as you know. The bad days, at least at first, far outweigh the good. You spend a lot of time feeling ineffectual and underappreciated. If you can cope with that and get past it, stop looking for praise and thanks from the kid, his family, and the world at large, then you can do a much better job. The bad days get fewer as the relationship builds.

Bibliography

Applewhite, Eric and Davis, Daryl "Responses to Uncertainty in Mentoring at the CLC: Implementation of Structure or Support" Inquiry paper for Community Literacy and Intercultural Interpretation.

Flower, Linda (1998) Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing in College and Community Harcourt Brace College Publishers

Freedman, Marc (1993) The Kindness of Strangers San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Goodrich, Scott "Five O'clock World" Inquiry paper for Community Literacy and Intercultural Interpretation.

McLaughlin, Milbrey W. "Embedded Identities: Enabling Balance in Urban Contexts" Identity and Inner-City Youth.

Rose, Mike (1989) Lives on the Boundary New York: The Free Press

Wilson, Willam Julius (1996) "When Work Disappears: The World of the Urban Poor" New York: Knopf

..