



Wanted: Many More Mentors

BY JOAN THARP

It can be easy for children to find themselves on the wrong road. Growing up, they come to all sorts of crossroads. Many children find caring adults waiting there for them, to take their hands and help point the way safely across. The not-so-lucky ones make the best decisions they can about which way to go, muster their courage, and set off on their own.



In the San Francisco Bay Area, hundreds -- perhaps thousands -- of children are on waiting lists to be paired with volunteer mentors who can serve as

friends, cheerleaders, and guides. They are children like 14-year-old Luis from Menlo Park, who waited nearly a year for someone to share adventures with while he and his family heal from domestic violence.

Until recently, Luis, 15, from Menlo Park was waiting for a mentor. Finally, at the end of March, the right mentor came along: Gonzalo Alvarado, who shares Luis' love for the San Francisco Giants. [More >>](#)

Photos by L.A. Cicero

Trouble is, there just aren't enough mentors to satisfy the need. It isn't a new problem, nor is it a local problem. MENTOR, the leading national organization promoting mentoring, estimates that, nationally, 17.6 million young people ages 8 to 18 need mentors, and of those children only about 2.5 million are in formal, high-quality mentoring programs. The rest -- 15.1 million kids -- wait.

And that's too bad, because mentoring works. A landmark 1995 study by the social policy research group Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) made it clear that mentoring helps youth make choices that are life-enhancing. P/PV tracked 500 kids mentored through Big Brothers Big Sisters, and compared them with 500 similar kids waiting to be mentored. After 18 months, the kids who were mentored were:

- 46 percent less likely to begin using drugs
- 27 percent less likely to begin using alcohol
- 53 percent less likely to skip school
- 33 percent less likely to fight
- They also were more confident about their ability to do well in school,
- had more positive relationships with friends and family, and had better attitudes toward school and their future.

Here's how Gisela Bushey, executive director of Child Advocates in Milpitas, CA, sees it: "If a child in foster care doesn't have a stable place to launch into, you'll have another post-emanicipation statistic: 65 percent of kids coming out of foster care end up homeless, in juvenile facilities, or dead at an early age."

Bushey adds, "I can't stress enough the value of having a stable, caring adult presence in a child's life."

Through its grantmaking program to promote the emotional and behavioral health of local preteens, the Palo Alto-based Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health makes grants to a number of nonprofits in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties in support of youth mentoring, including Child Advocates, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, Future Families, and Friends for Youth.

While the evidence that mentoring works is plentiful, the list of volunteers interested in being mentors is not. It's always been a challenge to recruit mentors, foundation grantees say, and particularly so after the dot-com crash of 2000. Recently, some grantees have seen an uptick in volunteer numbers, but some haven't. All agree that there are far more kids in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties in need of mentors than there are mentors available for them. For example, Child Advocates has a list of 400 children waiting to be paired with court-appointed advocates to support them through the foster care system. Bushey says that, even as more kids enter foster care, her organization's volunteer numbers have been down 11 percent since 2002, and are only now beginning to rise.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of San Francisco and the Peninsula says it could use at least another 100 mentors. "It's just understood in this line of work that recruitment is a challenge. It's something you always need to be mindful about," says Sherry Squire Mitchell, the organization's executive director.

Making a Long-Term Commitment to Nurture

Why don't more people volunteer to be mentors? MENTOR and local nonprofits cite a variety of reasons.

First, there just aren't enough volunteers in general, no matter what the need. Only about 29 percent of Americans ages 16 and older volunteer in any capacity, according to U.S. Census Bureau data for 2004, and that number has increased only slightly in recent years.

Layer on top of this the fact that mentoring asks for more of a time commitment (usually four to 10 hours a month for at least a year), and its rewards take longer to unfold than many volunteer activities. Mentoring is about persistence and patience; it's not a Saturday outing to clean up the beach, as absolutely worthy as that is. Thus, people stretched for time who want to see an immediate payoff from their efforts are likely to shy away from mentoring.

Facts about Mentoring

- Nationwide, an estimated 17.6 million young people ages 8 to 18 need mentors.
- Less than one-third of Americans over age 16 volunteer in any capacity.

Future Families, a foster care and adoption agency in San Jose, ran smack into the time-commitment problem recently when a consultant helping the agency design a new mentoring program concluded that mentors should be paid. The reason? To be successful, the new program would require at least an 18-month commitment from mentors, and it was unlikely that enough people would volunteer under these circumstances.

Becky Cooper, the executive director for Redwood City-based Friends for Youth, a nonprofit that finds mentors for young people living in high-risk environments, cites time commitment as the key reason that, throughout her 26 years with the organization, recruiting mentors has been a challenge. Friends for Youth typically wants mentors to spend three hours a week with their "Junior Friend" and commit to at least a year.

There's good reason for the commitment these organizations expect. Research shows that mentoring has the strongest and most lasting impact when there is frequent contact between the mentor and child, and the relationship lasts at least a year. A recent [foundation evaluation of its preteen grantmaking program](#) validates this.

Also, the nurturing nature of mentoring works against itself when it comes to attracting male mentors, say experts and some male mentors themselves. They say that men are less likely than women to see themselves as nurturers,

and worry more about whether they will "do it right." Plus, some men say they are skittish about being alone with someone else's child. U.S. census data provides evidence of a gender difference in volunteering. In 2004, one-fourth of men and one-third of women ages 16 and older volunteered, and women did so at higher rates than men across age groups, education levels, and other characteristics.

Mentoring Organizations Get Inventive

To recruit more mentors, some local nonprofits are beefing up marketing, making it as easy as possible to train and support mentors, and creating other volunteer opportunities within the organization that can serve as pipelines to mentoring.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, on behalf of its chapters nationwide, launched a campaign last year to bring in more volunteers by dispelling misconceptions about mentoring. The organization looked into

the reasons people do and don't volunteer and found that many people think mentoring requires special skills and takes a lot more time than it actually does. The campaign includes [TV ads that feature a Big and a Little being silly together](#) -- such as having burping contests and "I can make you blink" stare-downs. The campaign also emphasizes that the time commitment can be as little as an hour a week. Robin Palley, vice president of marketing and communications for the national organization, says the TV ads brought in thousands of new inquiries about becoming a mentor.

Child Advocates boosted its ranks of potential mentors when it launched a non-advocate volunteer program offering short-term projects. "We thought the program would help our advocate program, but we didn't think it would happen so fast. As they become familiar with us and better understand the commitment we ask, more than half of these volunteers ultimately convert to being advocates," Bushey says.

Child Advocates also saw impressive results from dramatically shortening the amount of time between attending an initial orientation and completing the training. Orientation and trainings used to run every five or six weeks; now they run weekly and are offered several times during the day and evening. Child Advocates now captures an additional 30 percent of volunteers they otherwise would have lost because the old process wasn't as streamlined. "It's our job to find a better way to move forward with people's passion," Bushey says.



Tiffany, 7, found Thuy through Big Brothers, Big Sisters of Santa Clara County. Thuy envisions a long mentoring relationship with Tiffany. "I'm already thinking about how I can help her when she gets ready to date," Thuy says. [More >>](#)



'Go For It'

Mentor Marty Guericke knows lots of the reasons people turn away from mentoring. The 47-year-old mentor with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Santa Clara County used to tell himself that it might be too big a commitment. Nine years after a friend shoved a Big Brothers Big Sisters card in his face and he was paired with 10-year-old Mike, he has some advice for anyone who's thought about but hasn't acted on mentoring: "Go for it. Just stick your foot in the door and do it. You can always find time for it; it's really no big deal. And you'll have a great time."

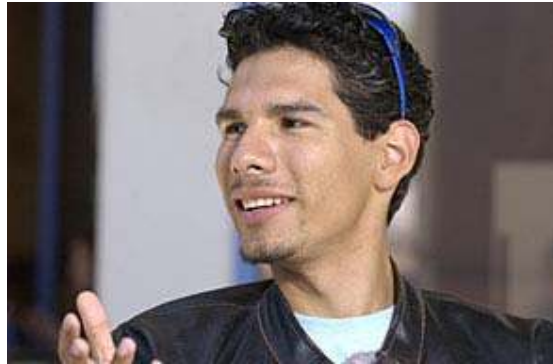


An unlikely pair, mentor Marty and Mike, now 19, found that their differences brought them together. "I am who I am today because of Marty," Mike says. "Without him, I'd probably be a high school dropout living at home with my mom, who'd be yelling at me all the time. I couldn't be happier with my life as it is right now." [More >>](#)

The Nerd and the Artist

BY JOAN THARP

They were a sight to behold from the get go. Lanky computer programmer Marty Guericke towered over his Little Brother, 10-year-old Mike. "He was the tallest, skinniest guy I'd ever seen," recalls Mike, now 19. "And he had that total nerd look: the white socks that come up all the way to the knees, the pants that don't quite come all the way down to the shoes, the all-white tennis shoes that kind of squeak when you walk. I almost expected the pen protector in the pocket."



Now 19 and in college, Mike still keeps in touch with his longtime mentor, Marty Guericke.

Photos by L.A. Cicero

Of course, Mike wasn't exactly a fashionisto himself back then. A skinny and shy kid, he wore baggy khakis, print shirts, and an oversized jacket, "one of those weird giant ones that your mom buys in a thrift store," Mike says.

But Marty and Mike knew how to have fun. There were miniature golf outings and camping trips, go-carting, movies, and times just hanging out together at Marty's place, playing with Marty's geeky electronic toys. And, suddenly, the kid who could never get his father's attention, who got into dancing and acting and singing, in part, to impress his dad, had this steady and loving male presence in his life. Someone who showed up every week like he said he would. Who wanted to know what Mike thought and what he liked. Who wanted to hear him sing opera. Who told Mike to keep moving, keep pushing, even after his grades slipped, even after two knee surgeries sidelined him from track, even after Mike's sister (and best friend), Alex, died of leukemia the summer of his sophomore year in high school.

The kid who used to eat his lunch in the farthest corner of the playground, and who always wore a hat pulled down so low on his forehead that you couldn't see his eyes, came out of hiding in high school. He became a star runner, and was selected to be on the WB20-TV Student Council (a group of teens chosen every year to advise the station on youth issues and create PSAs aimed at teens).

Today, Mike juggles college and four part-time jobs. He's learning Japanese, and is saving money to go to Japan this summer, all to further his interests in becoming either a linguist or a 3-D animation cartoonist.

"I am who I am today because of Marty," Mike declares. "Without him, I'd probably be a high-school dropout living at home with my mom, who'd be yelling at me all the time. I couldn't be happier with my life as it is right now."