

## ***A Qualitative Evaluation of a Mentor Program for At-Risk Youth: The Participants' Perspective***

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**ABSTRACT:** This article presents a qualitative evaluation of the first year of a mentor program for at-risk high school youth in a low income urban setting with high rates of youth and violent crime. Pre and posttest data were collected employing a standardized set of open-ended questions regarding the program and the mentees' relationships with their mentors. Overall there appears to be congruence between the mentees' expectations at pretest and posttest outcomes. Most were overwhelmingly positive about the program, developed a valued relationship with their mentors, and secured concrete benefits as well (e.g., employment and greater academic achievement). Two mentors who had a leadership role were also interviewed. Case studies of four of the adolescents are presented along with implications for practice.

**KEY WORDS:** Mentor; Mentee; Role Model; At-Risk Youth; Prevention.

### **Introduction**

Mentoring programs pairing adult volunteers and youth are not new. Moreover, the mentoring relationship is the core of organizations such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters and is meant to serve a variety of the developmental and emotional needs of the youth participants. More recently, however, mentoring has become viewed as a specific preventive intervention method for "at-risk" youth. Risk areas have included

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potential for school dropout and poor academic achievement and educational aspirations, criminal/delinquent behavior, gang affiliations, and substance abuse (Flaxman & Ascher, 1992; Jemp; 1995, Smink, 1990). Mentoring components have multiplied in youth intervention programs sponsored by social service agencies and educational institutions across the country (Carmola, 1995).

Flaxman, Ascher and Harrington (1989) note that mentors can provide at-risk youth with both access to resources otherwise not available to them, and psychological and emotional support to foster behavioral and attitudinal changes. The actual success of mentoring programs in providing these opportunities, however, remains an open question as there is limited research evaluating the effectiveness of mentoring programs (Carmola, 1995; Ianni, 1992; Rand Report, 1992; Struchen & Porto, 1997).

This article presents a qualitative evaluation of the first year of a mentor program for at-risk high school youth in a low income urban setting with high rates of youth and violent crime. This small incorporated city within Los Angeles County, with a population of over 114,000, is estimated to have 31 active youth gangs with over 7000 members. In 1997 there were 553 gang incidents, 321 with weapons involvement including 233 with firearms. From 1997 to 1998, there was a 46% increase in homicide (from 24 to 35) and 738 aggravated assaults (City Police Department Annual Statistics<sup>1</sup>). Within the small school district composed of two high schools, two middle schools, two K-8 and ten K-6 elementary schools, in the 1996-1997 school year there were 1,394 suspensions and 55 expulsions due to violent behavior, along with the confiscation of 11 guns on school campuses (source: school district records). The environment clearly places youth at risk for engagement in criminal or delinquent behavior and/or for victimization.

### **Overview of the Mentor Program**

Project R.E.S.C.U.E. (Reaching Each Student's Capacity Utilizing Education) is a mentoring program sponsored through a collaboration between a community agency providing youth services and the local city fire department. Firefighters serve as mentors to high school students in a one-to-one relationship. The purpose of this relationship is to provide a supportive adult role model who will encourage the youth's social and emotional development, help improve his/her aca-

ademic and career motivation and achievement, expand the youth's life experiences, redirect youth from at-risk behaviors, and foster an improved self-esteem.

Although mentors and mentees were encouraged to meet on a weekly basis, each dyad maintained different schedules and modes of contact based upon the needs and time constraints of the two individuals. The dyads participated in both separate and group activities. Separate activities ranged from simply spending time talking together to assistance with academic and career preparation, and activities involving common interests. Several group activities were organized by the agency staff, including: a "Peace, Love, and Unity Breakfast," "Peace Night Out" at the Magic Johnson Theatres, a water rafting trip on the Kern River, and evening sporting events. Several of the mentees also served as representatives to a Peer Helping Conference in Santa Clara, California.

## **Methods**

### *Participants*

During the first year, 18 mentor-mentee dyads participated in the program. Of the mentees, nine were African Americans, eight Latino, and one biethnic (African American and Latino). There were an equal number of males and females in the program. Adult interviewees consisted of the fire chief, a Latino male, and an African American female firefighter, both in their early forties.

### *Data Collection*

In evaluating the impact of programs which employ the development of a relationship as a primary mode of intervention, qualitative methods which seek to discover the participants' subjective views regarding the experience provide uniquely relevant data. To this end, qualitative data were obtained from program participants at the beginning of the program in September 1997 and at the end of the academic year, June 1998. To obtain mentees' perspectives with respect to their expectations regarding the program and their relationship with their mentors, individual audiotaped interviews employing a standardized set of open-ended questions were conducted in a community meeting room. The post-intervention data consisted of responses to the same

open-ended questions posed in the past tense in order to obtain the mentees' evaluations of the outcomes relative to their initial expectations. However, because the youth were not available for individual interviews, the questions were completed in a written survey format.

The two firefighters who assumed the leadership of the mentor program provided interviews at the same two points in time. The open-ended questions paralleled those employed with the youth participants and sought to obtain the mentors' perspectives. Finally, case study data were secured via interviews with the two agency staff members who were in charge of both the high school violence prevention program and the mentor program. These staff members had long-term relationships with the youth and interacted with them in program activities once or twice a week.

## Findings

### *Mentees' Perspective*

The mentees were asked what made them decide to become involved in the Mentor Program. The most common response was to have someone to talk with and share time and activities.

I would have someone to talk to on an equal basis.

To have somebody to do something with.

I had a lot of extra time on my hands, and I wanted a mentor since I be by myself alot.

A number of mentees further specified that they wanted a mentor to talk with because they found it difficult to talk to family members:

I can't talk to my parents about everything.

You know you can tell your parents certain things, but you can't tell them some things, because they might think different or they might react different, and it might not be for the better.

To elaborate upon their expectations of the program, the mentees were asked what they "would . . . like to get out of the program." The most frequent responses again referred to having someone they could communicate with, but at this point a number of the youth added the concept of friendship; they hoped to have an adult they could regard as a trusted friend who offered an opportunity for open communication.

A real trustworthy friend to talk to and someone that will be there when I need them.

A special kind of friend.

A communication line between teens and adults—to share interests

The mentees recognized, however, that the friendship was different from that experienced with their peers.

It'll be different from my friends, because they're an adult, and they'll be more mature than my friends.

Look up to them, because anything that they've done in the past when they were a kid, they've been there done that. They'll tell me, 'Don't do that, because I've been there before, and you shouldn't go that route.'

A few students also felt an accepting nonjudgmental manner was an important part of this relationship.

Doesn't judge me.

Listens to what I have to say.

Others offered a more concrete response, that they also hoped the program would provide them with help with their homework.

To have the youth focus on personal development as well as external outcomes, they were asked if there were ways they would like the program to affect them "as a person." The question was clarified further: "Help you develop new skills or knowledge, change in some way, improve in some areas, etc." While some of the youth had difficulty with the question and answered that they were "not sure" or simply "no, not really," a number of the mentees cited areas of potential self-improvement.

Make me a better person.

Withstand peer pressure.

Might speak up more.

Help me deal with adults better. They try to figure us out just like we try to figure them out.

Help me understand people more.

Don't prejudge.

To get a clearer understanding of how the youth perceived the mentor-mentee relationship, they were asked: "What kind of a relationship would you like to have with your mentor?" The youth described some of the qualities of the relationship:

Not so tight.

Full of trust. I can trust him; he can trust me. Reliable.

Fun, close, confidential person to talk to.

Talk about my schooling, things like love life, I don't know (followed by slightly embarrassed laugh).

The greatest diversity in responses was given to the question eliciting a description of the "perfect mentor." This may have been the case because the youth appeared to describe the perfect mentor in terms of matching their own specific interests and needs.

A good match—same personality.

Responsible, but still can have fun.

Athletic.

Not boring—not wild, but fun, adventurous.

Loves to read.

Very outgoing.

Always going to be there when you need them.

Honest.

Can talk to him with slang; on my own level.

Be there, fun.

One mentee awaiting a mentor had a very detailed sense of the perfect mentor:

A perfect mentor would be someone you could always talk to; someone you could ask them for advice, and they would always give you the best advice. And in the future when you're grown up, you could look back and say 'they really helped me; they've really been there and a great role model.'

The outcomes described in the post-intervention surveys closely parallel the mentees expectations. For example, four of the mentees mentioned establishing a new friendship or relationship as an outcome of the program.

I got a chance to make friends with a couple of firemen—became good friends with a grown-up.

A new friend—someone I can talk to.

I feel I met people that I didn't know before I joined this program.

I had more friendship and trust.

Three of the males credited the program with improving their behavior.

How to stay out of trouble and respect others and stop the violence.  
A lot less trouble.  
I feel I got a different meaning for life—meaning not fighting or stuff that would hurt anyone.

Three mentioned specific skills or experiences.

My mentor got me a job.  
A nice time and experience in the fire department.  
How to communicate.

Three simply gave general positive evaluations.

I feel this program has a lot to offer.  
It is O.K.  
I think it is real cool.

When asked to relate particular experiences they enjoyed with their mentors, the mentees' responses were very diverse, mirroring the unique mentor-mentee relationship. Three of the youth mentioned the river rafting field trip taken by the group. Moreover, one of the mentees found the trip rewarding, not only because of the adventure, but for emotional reasons:

I enjoyed the river rafting trip we took to the Kern River, because we bonded a lot and got a chance to talk about each other's problems.

One of the young women related that the mentor had taken her to the Department of Motor Vehicles to get her learner's permit and allowed her to practice driving in her car so that, "Now I got my license."

"Going to the movies" was mentioned as were general responses such as "I have a lot of fun." One mentee mentioned learning "how to communicate" and "to trust." Although varied, all the comments were very positive.

The mentees were asked to indicate whether participating in the program had brought about a personal change or improvement. All but one of the mentees related positive changes they had experienced as a result of the program. Some indicated changes in prior negative or violent behavior.

Got me off the streets.

It makes me realize there are a lot of different programs out there like this one I'm in instead of being out there destroying the community.

Two students credited their improved success in school to the program.

Yes, it helped me improve my grades and learn how to succeed in the future.

It helped me improve my schoolwork.

Changes regarding values and perceptions were also mentioned.

It made me understand people and adults a lot more.

It showed me different people are the same sometimes.

Even the one comment that was not positive held out positive expectations for his new mentor:

Not yet, but I am looking forward to it.

The mentees were asked to describe the "kind of relationship" they have with their mentor or how they "get along." The students all described the relationship itself as very positive, based primarily on "getting along" with each other.

A brother relationship. We get along real good.

We get along and it's a great relationship.

We communicate more. He gots my back. I got his; it's ok; its good.

We get along. She is cool.

The one frequent complaint was that time constraints interfered with the relationship. After indicating they "get along" very well, two mentees reported:

We just can't find the time to be together.

Yes, we get along, but I haven't talked to her in a while.

When asked to describe how they feel about their mentor, the responses ranged from a simple "OK," "good" or "cool" to "I'm happy with him. He's helped me out a whole lot."

Two youth again added complaints about scheduling problems or interaction to their positive statement.



I have problems to get together with him.  
Well he seems like a cool person but he needs to communicate with me  
and I need to communicate with him.

The last question asked the participants if there were anything they'd like to change or add to the program. All but three mentees answered the question with a "No" response. Two of the others suggested more "outings" and one "more communication."

Overall there appears to be considerable congruence between the mentees' expectations upon entering the program and their perceived outcomes. Most developed a valued relationship with their mentor that offered them someone with whom they could communicate. In their mentors they found an adult they could "get along with." Moreover, a number of the mentors also provided concrete assistance as well as emotional support including engaging in joint activities of mutual interest (e.g., outings, golf, movies), providing growth enhancing opportunities such as helping the youth secure a job or a learner's permit and driving experience, and direct help with school work.

The youth appeared to be overwhelmingly positive about the program, indicating that the outcomes were all positive both in terms of concrete benefits and at the interpersonal and affective level. The only problem that was indicated by a number of mentees were difficulties in spending enough time with their mentors because of the mentors' or mutual schedules.

Significant changes in values, goals, and perspectives were hinted at by a number of the mentees, who found that the relationship helped them change their attitudes and behavior in a more pro-social and achievement-oriented direction. The mentees' brief comments do not allow much elaboration on this very important outcome. However, brief case examples of a number of the mentees whose lives took a notably different trajectory following their involvement in the Mentor Program are presented later in this article.

### *Mentors' Perspectives*

Neither of the two mentors had been part of a formal mentor program before; however, both had considerable experience dealing with youth in a type of mentoring capacity. The Captain has had many years of experience training the new, young, auxiliary firefighters (19 to 22 year olds he has "taken under [his] wing"), as well as the younger Fire Explorers. G. and her husband have taken numerous "street" youth

into their home over the years and provided a structured and supportive living environment for them.

Both mentors emphasized a sense of community and a desire to help meet the needs of the youth of their community as the main reasons for their involvement in, and commitment to, the program. The Captain stated this directly:

Initially for me it was just wanting to do something, wanting to get involved in the community. Taking it a step farther was trying to help youth. I've been here 18 years. I feel this city and this department have given me a lot. This is my way of giving back. It sounds corny, but that's the way I really feel, not trying to change the world, but one or two people at a time.

G. wanted to help create the sense of a caring community, helping youth by directing them and using her own experiences as a vehicle:

It is important to get back to the old neighborhood sense. Many kids are growing up with one parent or another person who has come in to be a parent that they don't like. If I can bring that to the table as an experience I had growing up . . . if I can bring some of my basic knowledge of all the terrible things they have on them today, I can explain to a kid how you can utilize that to be a strength for you to be the best that you can be instead of a negative thing. Just make sure you don't turn around and do it to someone else because you know what it feels like.

The two mentors agreed that letting youth know that there are people who care about their welfare is important.

Give them a helping hand. Let them know that there are people out there who care.

G. reported that she and her husband had worked with many youth over the years and had always stressed that they would never abandon them, because, irrespective of their behavior, they had "just as much value as the next person."

The mentors felt that many youth today do not have adults who are willing or available to listen to them and wanted to provide such an opportunity.

Lots of kids don't have any support. They don't have an ear. They don't have anyone they can talk to. I'm glad to be that ear.

Both mentors saw themselves as important role models for the youth of the community on both the professional and personal level.

The 16 or 17 kids we deal with see that we're somewhat successful. Maybe that'll open their eyes and they'll say 'Yeah, if they can do it, maybe I can do it.'

G. stressed not only her own values and experiences, but the experience the group of firefighters offered the youth of working together irrespective of gender and ethnic differences. She felt this was important in this community in which an African American youth "won't even sit next to a Hispanic youth," and vice versa. The Captain expressed similar views:

I consider myself a role model as I do G., not just as a firefighter, but as a female and an African American and myself as a Latino. The kids need to see that; it has an impact on them.

The mentors were asked to specify any goals they had in working with their mentees. Both had already begun to develop strong relationships with their mentees and were very clear about what they hoped they could offer the youth and the concomitant changes they hoped would result. The Captain outlined the following goals for his mentee.

1. "help him to become a Fire Explorer; get him in shape physically, mentally, and emotionally."
2. "give him the opportunity to grow—become a more productive citizen and a more productive student."
3. "see him more confident, more vocal, more assertive."
4. "make him a better person by being exposed to other people—being exposed to professionals . . . know what being professional and respectful of the public means. Firefighters have to be that way. We have to go out there and treat everybody the same and not act like we're doing someone a favor." He hoped the values of "the work ethic" and "being respectful of other people" would "rub off."

As is evident, career and personal goals were meshed because his mentee's ultimate goal is to become a firefighter. (Refer to Case 2 for further details and outcomes.)

G.'s goals for her mentee focused on education, encouraging career

goals, and developing an appropriate presentation of self. Specifically G. stated she wanted her mentee to

1. "finish school" which requires her to "stay out of the clubs and hit the books" and "work on her math skills."
2. "work on self-esteem."
3. learn to "dress a certain way depending on where you are going—club, school, job." She did not want to curb her style, but wanted her to learn appropriate dress and behavior for each situation, particularly related to job or career.
4. "do things on time." The mentee had a serious tardy problem at school, arriving late most of the time. G. also saw this as an important skill to learn in preparation for any future employment.

(Refer to Case 1 for further details and outcomes.)

The mentors were asked to indicate any changes they anticipated in themselves as a result of participating in the program. The Captain, both earnest and amused, answered: "Maybe I'll become a little more street-wise, gain a little more street-sense." He shared that he and the mentee had agreed upon an exchange:

We have a deal. He's going to make me more cool, and I'm going to try to give him more formal training like learn to shake hands properly when you go into an interview instead of all these secret hand shakes. I don't know those, but I'd like to find out.

In addition he felt that the experience would teach him to be "more open-minded about things and people—like seeing kids dressed in baggy clothes and stereotyping them as gangbangers." Ultimately, he hoped the experience would restore his "faith in kids."

In the closing interview, the captain evaluated his experience as a mentor, indicating that he had, in fact, "picked up a little street sense." More important, however, was the new perspective regarding the youth of the community that he developed:

My understanding of the youth of the community changed. I sort of had a negative impression of the kids in the community until I got to know them in the program.

G. already considered herself quite street wise and felt that most of the changes would be intrapersonal. That is, she felt the interaction with her mentee would help her process some of her own issues by

having to deal with her feelings and to receive feedback. Moreover, she felt the role of mentor offered a growth experience because of the "ability to have an influence on somebody else, share similar experiences and grow from that." Ultimately, she saw all these experiences as leading to an increase in her own self-esteem. Her final evaluation at the end of the year regarding the benefits the program offered her included:

learning "to structure my life to include another individual that became a valuable part of me," and experiencing the building of "trust, honesty" and priorities in their ongoing relationship.

Finally, each mentor offered a clear description of how they saw their role in the relationship with the mentee. The Captain primarily saw the mentor as a confidant and sounding board:

I want to be his friend. I want him to consider me his friend, not necessarily a mentor or a father-figure or a buddy; a friend—someone you can come and talk to. I told him from the get go 'I'm not someone who's going to preach to you. I want to be able to tell you things. I want you to be able to tell me anything without fear about my going back to your mom and telling her. I want you to trust me.'

Over the course of their interaction, the youth and their relationship matured:

We have a strong friendship, more a mutual friendship than mentor-mentee, because he has come so far. He has matured so much. We see each other on a regular basis.

G., on the other hand, saw her relationship with her mentee as varying depending on the mentee's needs:

At times I have to be her friend; at times I have to be her mother; at times I have to be her big sister; at times I have to be her father. Whatever it is, I want her to be able to look at me as a friend and somebody that cares about her as a person and cares about where she's going and what she plans on doing with herself. I think that all of those things incorporate into being a friend to her, being a friend in different ways, whatever her needs are at that moment.

Essentially, the mentors and mentees had the same view of the relationship. All agreed that the relationship between the two is a special type of friendship that offers a supportive and trustworthy listener and a caring sounding board. Both mentors and mentees agreed that

the relationship had been positive and growth enhancing for the youth participants, and the mentors noted important benefits they had also accrued from the relationship.

In terms of concrete outcomes, by the end of June 1998, eight of the mentees had graduated from high school; four of these were accepted into four-year state colleges, and two of the others enrolled at least part-time in two-year college programs. The remaining ten youth were continuing in high school in the fall. Fifteen of the mentees completed a two-week job readiness course, and six had already obtained employment.

### Case Examples

The impact of the relationship with the mentor on the life of the mentee is best illustrated by a description of the change over time in multiple aspects of the mentee's life. To this end, four case examples follow that describe significant prosocial changes and developmental growth in four participants in the Mentor Program.

#### *Case 1*

Gina (pseudonym) is an 18 year old Latina who is a second generation gang member; that is, her parents and other relatives are former gang members. At the time she entered the program, she was considered a "hardcore" gang member of a violent male street gang. In fact, Gina had been "jumped" into the gang which consisted of surviving a beating by a group of the male gang members. As a gang member, she had been both victimizer and victim, having been shot and also involved in violence against others. She was frequently truant and cared little about school. She was known for her "bad attitude," easily angered, and prone to physical violence by any look or comment she might deem offensive.

Gina became involved in the program through the efforts of agency staff conducting a Violence Prevention program at her high school. The staff reached out to her and encouraged her to attend the lunch time meetings. She later disclosed to staff members that this had an impact on her because "all of a sudden someone cared that didn't have to."

Because of her involvement in the violence prevention program activities, Gina began to attend school more regularly. Despite her new efforts and the staff's encouragement and support, she was still far behind in the units necessary to graduate. It was clear she needed one-on-one assistance.

It was at this point that Gina entered the Mentor Program and was paired with a female firefighter. The match was a perfect one in that the firefighter was also seen as "tough" and was quickly able to gain Gina's respect and trust. Gina's mentor became not only advisor and confidant, but took inten-

sive measures to assure that Gina would make up all the credits necessary to graduate. For example, she personally took her to the school and helped arrange a schedule of evening and Saturday make-up classes. Moreover, she monitored Gina's attendance, literally checking if she were attending and providing transportation if needed. Her young son even provided Gina with tutoring in math which led to a strong bond between Gina and her "little brother."

The results have been extraordinary and dramatic. Not only did Gina complete all the requirements and graduate from high school in June, she also completed medical assistant training and is presently enrolled full time in junior college. She also began doing volunteer work at the agency. The staff was so impressed by her dedication and ability to work with the youth that she was hired as a youth health educator for their AIDS prevention project.

Even more impressive are the interpersonal and emotional/psychological changes that are evident. The once sullen, hostile, defensive young woman now enters the agency office with hugs for staff members, a happy disposition, and open communication with the adult staff members and the youth she serves in her agency position. She testified to her transformation at the Mentor Program graduation dinner, talking about her experiences over the past year, her mentor's and staff's efforts on her behalf, and her close relationship with her mentor's son. And then she began to cry and confessed, "I wouldn't have cried before. I didn't think it was okay to cry."

### *Case 2*

Joe (pseudonym) is an 18 year old biethnic male whose father is African American and mother is Latina. He has been raised in a very chaotic household with his mother the primary parent, his father's presence erratic, and many nieces and nephews (children of his adult siblings) entering and leaving the household at various times. While not an actual gang member, he claimed gang affiliation, knew all the gang members, and had begun to dress like a gang member. He was clearly heading toward greater gang involvement.

At this point the staff targeted a group of eight gang-affiliated youth, including Joe, and took them on a weekend camp-out. The experience served as the impetus for Joe to become involved in the violence prevention program on campus. At the same time Joe's mother contacted the agency staff seeking help for her son. She indicated concern that her alcoholism and various health problems were negatively impacting him. He had, in fact, begun drinking (with breakfast consisting of a beer), demonstrated little interest in school, and was often truant.

Joe's involvement in the violence prevention leadership group was encouraged by the staff, and Joe completed the leadership training program. With the help of a member of the Advisory Board, he was given a job at a 7-11 store and successfully completed the job training sessions. His new sense of responsibility was demonstrated on his first day of work. Although he was "jumped" (physically attacked) on his way to work, he still went to work and completed the day. He maintained this part-time job for one year where he was considered a valued, responsible and capable employee. However, personal problems still remained, including his drinking problem. It was at this point that the Mentor Program was initiated.

The Mentor Program and the Captain who became his mentor were ideal for Joe, who had earlier expressed the desire to become a firefighter. The mentor not only served as a professional role model, but provided the nurturing father figure missing from his life. Besides spending time together socially, his mentor helped him train, prepare, and discipline himself for the Fire Explorers' test. Joe was one of the few who passed the test (which is the same as the physical test given to the firefighters). A change in attitude, perception of his life and opportunities, and life goals was very evident.

Summer of 1997, he wanted to work for the agency, but funds were not available. He contacted the local school district's Summer Youth Program and had the agency write a letter proposing summer positions at the agency. As a result, the agency was funded for the first time for ten summer youth employees. Because of his initiative, he was given a leadership role in the summer program which he carried out in a serious, responsible, and capable manner.

In December he obtained a part-time job at a local grocery market. In June he graduated from high school and soon after received a promotion at the market where he worked forty hours per week as a crew leader.

He also enrolled at the local junior college in classes (e.g., for paramedics) to prepare for the firefighters' examination and entry into the firefighters academy. He subsequently was admitted into the fire department as a trainee.

### *Case 3*

Sheri (pseudonym) is an 18 year old African American female who lives with her mother and grandmother, but who has also at various times lived with her adult siblings. When she entered the agency's violence prevention program over two years ago she was very needy, emotionally and socially. Within her family she felt invisible, lost within the large group of older siblings, nieces and nephews. No one noticed whether she did well or poorly in school where her academic achievement was generally average. She had no career or academic goals or direction.

At school Sheri had few friends, and the few relationships she did have were not close. When she joined the violence prevention lunch meeting group at the high school, she was very quiet and withdrawn. However, she began to become more open and interactive with peers after she went through the agency's mediation training.

The agency director became her first mentor. Through this relationship Sheri became more intensely involved in the violence prevention program activities, developed a sense of ownership of the program, and began to take a leadership role, recruiting many peers into the advisory and activity groups and leading the planning of many of the activities. Her noteworthy increase in self-esteem and self-confidence was most evident in her presentation before 500 people at a Violence Prevention Conference.

Sheri joined the Mentor Program because she wanted to have an adult confidant with whom she could share thoughts, feelings, and common interests. Through this relationship, she continued to develop her social skills and bond with both adults and peers. She began to recognize problems caused by moodiness and her being judgmental, and learned to recognize and temper these



tendencies. She has developed excellent communication skills and taken strong stands appropriately, rather than reacting from an oppositional stance.

Sheri developed education goals and improved her grades sufficiently to be accepted into California State University, Northridge. She has completed her first year at the university, where she did well academically. The once shy, withdrawn teenager has performed in a university stage production, has become positive and outgoing, and enjoys an active social life with the many peer friends she has made in college.

#### *Case 4*

Eduardo (pseudonym) is a second generation male Latino. His parents immigrated from Mexico and have minimal education; the father just completed his GED.

Eduardo did not have a history of problems at home or at school and did not have any gang affiliation. He, however, was simply "lost in the crowd," an average student academically with no direction or goals. The one risk factor was his belief that fighting was an acceptable way to handle any conflicts or problems that might arise.

Eduardo's relationship with his mentor helped him expand his world in terms of experiences and goals, and in terms of self-development. Specifically, his mentor arranged for him to obtain a job at a local grocery market which he successfully undertook for six months. He quit his job after six months to pursue a new goal: to improve his grades sufficiently to be admitted to California State University, Northridge. He achieved his goal and attended the following year. Moreover, Eduardo learned to temper his response to potential conflict. For example, when another male bumped into him in a local store, he controlled his initial impulse to respond in kind or in a confrontational manner and let the incident go. His friends who were waiting outside the store informed him that he had made a wise decision since that particular individual is known to "pack" (carry a gun).

Eduardo's new self-assurance has been demonstrated in his presentations at conferences as a representative of the agency's violence prevention program. He is very popular with his peers while still maintaining respectful relationships with adults and being generous in offering his time and assistance to the agency staff on various projects and activities.

#### *Conclusion*

Each of the above adolescents brought a unique set of needs and challenges to the mentor-mentee relationship. The activities and level of involvement of each dyad varied. However, the outcomes were consistent across all four participants. The youth developed a strong bond with their mentors, which enabled them to make major positive developmental changes both emotionally and socially. Mentors provided opportunities that encouraged educational and career goals and moved the youth substantially in the direction of these goals. The relation-

ship with their mentors significantly changed the trajectory of the lives of each of these youth.

### **Implications for Social Welfare Practice**

Relationship development has always been a powerful intervention in social work practice. Relationship as therapeutic and life changing has been the core of the worker-client relationship. The relationship between a worker and a child or adolescent has also been recognized as a means of fostering healthy developmental progress.

The preceding accounts and case histories of the participants in the RESCUE Mentor Program attest to the power and benefits of building relationships between adults and youth outside of a therapeutic or professional context. In fact, there is indication that the voluntary nature of the mentors' participation demonstrated to the youth a level of concern for their welfare that may not have been assumed with a helping professional. The findings suggest that services to at-risk youth can be significantly increased by establishing community programs that employ committed adult volunteers who are willing to establish one-to-one relationships with youth. To ensure the success of the program, a number of critical tasks must be undertaken by the worker coordinating the program:

1. Volunteers must be carefully screened and selected. In the program described herein, the volunteers were all firefighters who had undergone background checks in order to be employed by the fire department. Besides screening for criminal history, each program needs to establish general eligibility criteria for the adult volunteers, depending upon the aims of the program and the characteristics of the youth they serve.
2. Orientation/education sessions need to be provided for the volunteers regarding their roles and responsibilities, relevant developmental issues, the particular needs and problems of this youth population, the goals of the program, and communication skills.
3. The worker needs to become acquainted with both the youth and the adult volunteers so that appropriate mentor-mentee matches can be made. This was a particular strength of the RESCUE Program in that personality, interest, and personal background issues were employed in forming the mentor/mentee dyads.

4. The worker needs to be available as a trouble-shooter and resource for both the mentors and the mentees. In the RESCUE Program, agency staff were available to assist mentors who needed to be kept abreast of problem situations in their mentees' lives and to provide resources to assist them. Other authors have suggested that staff support for mentors is important to reduce a sense of isolation and to encourage retention (Struchen & Porta, 1997).
5. The worker can organize group activities for participants in the program. This reduces the onus on the mentor of having to continuously come up with activities to engage the mentee. Group activities also allow for supportive relationships to be formed among the participants. Group activities in the RESCUE Program ranged from simple events such as attending a movie or sporting event to a group camping/rafting trip. The agency staff was able to acquire free or discounted tickets and event funding not available to individual mentors.

Agency workers can arrange and coordinate larger scale activities and provide ongoing suggestions for simpler activities for each dyad. For example, participants enjoyed such simple joint activities as conversing, jogging or playing sports together, going shopping, and visiting their mentor at the fire station. As the mentor and mentee relationship develops, and their individual and mutual interests become apparent, the need for the workers' supportive services will decrease.

6. An evaluation component needs to be included that combines qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative methods are needed to secure self-report data on the participants' perspectives regarding the program's impact on such intangibles as affect, attitudes, and values. Quantitative data can be obtained on more concrete outcomes such as school and career achievement. Although a comparison group is desirable and has been obtained in the evaluation of some mentor programs (Carmola, 1995), this may not be feasible in many settings where finding matching subjects is difficult or random assignment raises ethical or community service issues.

Given the large number of at-risk youth in need of supportive services, it is unrealistic to believe that the social work profession can directly provide for individual needs. Mentor programs offer an effective low-cost method for expanding the number of youth who can receive individualized supportive intervention. Moreover, as the RES-

CUE Program mentors testified, the relationship also provides an enrichment experience for the mentor.

### Limitations

The qualitative nature of the program evaluation and the non-representative sample limit the generalizability of the findings. The fact that the mentors were all firefighters may also have increased their status in the eyes of the youth. However, the overwhelmingly positive and candid comments of the youth, the thoughtful evaluations of the mentor leadership, and the positive life, educational, and career objectives of the at-risk youth who participated in the program offer concrete evidence that a mentoring relationship can impact the lives of high risk youth.

Despite the academic and career achievements of the youth participants and the positive assessments of the mentees and mentor leadership, caution must be used in drawing conclusions for the purpose of generalizing to other mentoring programs. The specific elements that contributed to the success of the program cannot be definitively determined from the participants' responses. However, the responses and the case descriptions do provide a constellation of concrete and psychosocial factors (e.g., relationship) which the participants felt contributed significantly to their development and success. Longitudinal studies of the program over time and of the mentee graduates are needed to determine the factors which remain most salient and the long-term benefits of the mentor-mentee experience.

### Note

1. The city and school district are not identified to protect the identity of the participants.

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