



Friends in Deed

All relationships run into a whirlpool or two. Here's how a few mentoring pairs made it through rough waters.

BY JULIE CURTIS AMES & JUSTIN MARTIN

AT FIRST, JE'LESIA JONES AND Helen Sostrè seemed like an ideal pair. "It started off beautifully," says Je'Lesia. "Helen actually chose me before I even met her and was very excited about our being paired up."

The two were matched through the One to One Mass Mentoring Partnership, a local chapter of The National Mentoring Partnership. Je'Lesia is an assistant to the chairman of the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination. Helen lives with her mother and two sisters and is estranged from her father.

Helen and Je'Lesia had much in common. They shared a passion for movies and the theater and spoke regularly about their harmonious relationship at One to One meetings.

But last winter Helen became withdrawn. Her usual enthusiasm for meetings was replaced by excuses for avoiding contact. Says Je'Lesia: "I kept calling, but she didn't want to talk or see me. I couldn't reach her."

What's a mentor to do? Je'Lesia relied on one of the hallmarks of good mentoring: she remained patiently persistent.

Je'Lesia correctly guessed that Helen was in over her head with a problem. "I wasn't about to let this child become an

adult before she had really grown up." Je'Lesia continued to call her young mentee and attempted to schedule time together. The ice was finally broken when Helen confided that her mother was sick and in need of care.

Helen's admission marked a turning point in the relationship. She acknowledged difficulty in sharing personal problems with anyone. "It's not like I didn't like her or anything," Helen says. "I just didn't think she could help me, so I kept it all to myself." Over time, Helen realized that sharing her problems with someone she trusted helped enormously in easing the burden.

As Helen learned to open up, Je'Lesia made sure she remained committed. "I told her that she was only a kid and she didn't have to bear that burden, and that I would help her get through it, no matter what it took."

HANGING IN THERE

Karren Fink and 12-year-old Esther Ramos faced different challenges. "She always wanted to go to quiet places like libraries," recalls Esther of her early experiences with her mentor. "I kind of wanted to go to the Roller [skating] Garden and more fun places like that."

Karren works as a labor-relations manager at General Mills. She was paired with



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Window shopping:
Je'Lesia Jones
(left) and mentee
Helen Sostrè
stroll in Boston's
Copley Mall

Esther through ACT, a nonprofit family-support organization in partnership with Jewish Family and Children Services of Minneapolis and the St. Louis Park public schools.

Karren was concerned that the kind of high-energy outings Esther enjoyed limited the pair's ability to talk to each other. In fact, Esther did not communicate much with her mentor in those early days. Karren, in turn, assumed that her young mentee was altogether uninterested in their relationship. "I didn't feel as if I was making a difference in Esther's life or even if she was benefiting from our time together," Karren states.

To make matters worse, Karren traveled frequently on business and was unable to meet regularly with Esther. Karren discovered that the less frequently they saw each other, the more difficult it became to pick up where they had left off. "I really felt terrible about how things were going between us because I knew at that point I was only in it halfheartedly," admits Karren.

But unwilling to abandon the relationship, Karren turned to the coordinator at ACT for help, and was fortified by the simple but powerful advice she received: "Don't give up."

So Karren persisted. The tide turned when she took Esther to the education section of a bookstore during one of their weekly meetings. According to Karren, Esther underwent a transformation. She did math exercises, read aloud and asked for Karren's help. It was a turning point for them.

When they left the bookstore that evening, Esther asked if they could return the following week. Karren jumped at the chance to reach out to her mentee and used the newfound forum to encourage Esther



PHOTOS BY MARNIE CRAWFORD SAMUELSON

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and push her to work harder to achieve her goals. Over time, the girl dramatically responded to the attention and became more open to her mentor.

Karren attributes the eventual success of her mentoring relationship to two factors: Esther’s participation in choosing an activity, and patience. “I showed her that I would stick around if it wasn’t fun all the time and even when it was hard.”

OFFERING HOPE

Occasionally, mentoring relationships encounter even more difficult, and emotionally charged, problems. This is due in part to the particularly complex challenges facing young people today.

Richard Rowe, director of programs and administration for the Baltimore Mentoring Partnership, recalls his

key, according to Rowe, is dependability.

“What mentoring offers children today is hope in the form of successful and consistent role models,” states Rowe. He believes that an act as simple as consistently showing up is a great gift to a child who may lack a caring adult in his life.

ROUGHER WATERS

Consistency and dependability can resolve even the most extreme and (fortunately) rare problems. The relationship between Tyrone Harris and his mentee, Arnold Preddy, both from Baltimore, was severely tested when authorities discovered a handgun in Arnold’s room in the group home where he was living. When Arnold missed a court date, a warrant was issued for his arrest.

During long months in rehab, he tried to make sense of his drastically changed circumstances. The hospital provided a social worker to help him through his grief. It was when he was talking to her one day that a light bulb simply went off. “I thought, ‘What a nice job to have, helping people put their lives back together.’” Tyrone joined Mentoring for Independence and was matched with Arnold Preddy.

But when the gun was found in Arnold’s room, Tyrone’s commitment was tested. He spent sleepless hours pondering whether to simply turn Arnold in. Ultimately, he concluded that, above all, his role as mentor dictated that he be there for his mentee. Tyrone also made a decision not to force his own opinions about the matter on Arnold. The goal of mentoring, he concluded, was to guide a person toward making his or her own decisions. “He gave me the choice,” says Arnold. “He talked to

me and knew I’d be smart enough to do the right thing.”

Arnold spent two months in Towson County Jail. During one of many phone calls, he told Tyrone: “I feel you.” He said it with an air of toughness, but Tyrone understood perfectly. It’s a streetwise term of endearment, a way of saying, “We’re close, like brothers.”

Tyrone will know that Arnold is no longer at risk when Arnold has enough control over his life that he is able to be a mentor himself. Already Arnold is taking steps toward becoming independent and productive. He keeps a book in which he’s written down his plans: get a job, save money, enroll in a GED class, pass the test, go to college. He wants to stay focused, and says that the toughest lesson he’s learned is that you can lose everything you’ve worked for in an instant. But his faith in his mentor is rock solid. “I told him I will always be there,” says Tyrone. ■

Reliability: Arnold’s mentor, Tyrone Harris (below)



Expert: Rowe of the Baltimore Mentoring Partnership (above)

Nothing could conceivably evoke more painful memories for Tyrone than handguns. In September 1990, he was the victim of a carjacking. His assailant ordered

him to walk away from the car, then shot him in the back. Tyrone wound up confined to a wheelchair, paralyzed from the waist down. Until that point, he had planned to finish college with a degree in biology and become a physical therapist. With the shooting, his plans were put on hold.

Ironically, it was the carjacking that prompted Tyrone to become a mentor.

youth in the late 1950s. “The biggest problems my peers and I faced were gum-chewing, name-calling and running in the school hallways. Today’s kids are confronted with drugs, alcohol, child abuse, gangs, pregnancy, AIDS and cyberpornography.”

While a mentoring relationship does not circumvent all of the difficulties that today’s youth confront, it can help. The

volunteer opportunities

- **Girl Scouts of the USA**
Work with girls from the ages of 5 to 17.
www.girlscouts.org
- **“I Have a Dream” Foundation**
Mentor students in public schools.
www.ihad.org

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