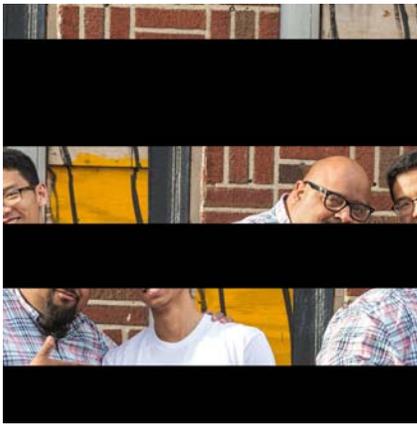


# Building Impactful Relationships

*Exploring Formal and Informal Mentoring*



Presented by



Research Conducted by

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS DONAHUE INSTITUTE

## Introduction

---

At the core of the youth mentoring field is the belief that empowering high-quality youth-adult relationships is central to the healthy growth and development of young people, enabling them to reach their full potential and to create more vibrant and resilient communities. Based on their recently revised strategic plan, Mass Mentoring Partnership (MMP) has broadened its scope to provide services and support to a wider field of youth development and youth serving organizations, in addition to formal youth mentoring programs, to increase opportunities for impactful relationship formation to greater numbers of Massachusetts youth.

In an effort to better understand high-quality youth-adult relationships, MMP has asked the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute (UMDI) to explore and illustrate common elements of thriving, impactful mentoring relationships that are found in the context of both formal, structured mentoring programs as well as in youth development and youth serving organizations where formal mentoring may not be an explicit goal. This Issue Brief depicts what research suggests are the characteristics of impactful relationships, grounding that research in four specific, but anonymous, case vignettes.

## Background

---

The consistent, enduring presence of a caring adult, whether from a structured or naturally occurring mentoring relationship, is critical and can have a large and lasting impact on a young person's life. As defined by the Search Institute,

*Developmental relationships are close connections through which young people develop their character strengths to discover who they are, gain the ability to shape their own lives, and learn how to interact with and contribute to others.*

"The common feature of successful interventions across all stages of the life cycle through adulthood is that they promote attachment and provide a secure base for exploration and learning for the child. Successful interventions emulate the mentoring environments offered by successful families." (Heckman, J. and Kautz, T., 2013) Research points to the importance of building and strengthening a web of important adult and peer relationships across all areas of a young person's life (Search Institute, 2015; Center for Promise, 2015). The more sources of support young people have, the better their chance for success; however, at least one stable, anchoring relationship can act as a gateway to a wider web of support (Center for Promise, 2015). The number and intensity of high-quality relationships, from parents and family members, friends and peers, teachers and school personnel, as well as adults in formal mentoring programs and youth development programs, have been linked to a broad range of positive outcomes across social, emotional, behavioral and academic areas of youth development.

The presence or absence of developmental relationships and supportive connections influence young people's expectations, behavior, and decisions on a variety of issues including school attendance and completion. For example, the perception that teachers care about their students is among the strongest predictors of student performance (Dweck, C., Walton, G. & Cohen, G., 2014). Research reveals that youth with positive developmental relationships are less likely to skip school, present better attitudes and behaviors at school, are more likely to re-engage with educational goals, and are more likely to attend college than their peers (Center for Promise, 2014). Furthermore, a systematic review of mentoring literature supports the effectiveness of high-quality mentoring in fostering positive youth development, including strengthening relationships between youth and their peers and other adults, promoting pro-social behavior and educational improvement, and reducing risky behaviors, especially for at-risk youth (Dubois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011; Civic Enterprises, 2014). In addition, Spencer and Rhodes (2014) highlight the benefits of increased frequency of interaction and, therefore, opportunities for relationship formation and access to other key relationships (i.e., family, friends, and other program staff) in after-school settings. In sum, developmental relationships across a variety of settings are critical as many young people continue to face high numbers of adverse childhood experiences and struggle to overcome the opportunity gap.

## Research Overview

---

For this study, MMP identified four youth-serving organizations and asked each to identify an adult/youth program pair whom they felt to be exemplars of a thriving, meaningful relationship in practice. Organizations were selected based both on their reputation and long-standing relationship with MMP, as well as to highlight the wide range and diversity of programming in the youth development field. The four organizations participating in this study were:

- **Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Massachusetts / MetroWest** – A formal community-based youth mentoring program, that professionally supports one-to-one relationships between adult mentors and elementary and middle school age youth with the goal of improving youth lives for the better.
- **Crossroads** – A summer and school-year program serving urban youth in grades 2 through 12 with experiential education, residential experiences and relationship development aimed at promoting social emotional and leadership growth, community service and engagement, and college access and success.
- **Scholar Athletes** – An on-site, drop-in program at 22 public high-schools in Boston and Springfield seeking to reduce the opportunity gap and support student achievement – academically, socially and emotionally - through athletics.
- **Raw Art Works** – A community-based, youth arts organization located in Lynn, Massachusetts providing a range of group programming rooted in art therapy with an aim to support and improve communication skills, youth identity, and a sense of community for those ages 7 – 19.

UMDI staff conducted phone and in-person interviews with key stakeholders, program staff, adult mentors, youth participants, and parents (where applicable or available) – from each of the four organizations to gain further insight into both the program and the identified mentoring pair and their relationship. This issue brief highlights the key cross-case findings and common tenets comprising impactful mentoring relationships, both formal and informal, developed within the varied context of youth-serving organizations followed by four illustrative case vignettes of current relationships at each of the participating organizations.

## Key Findings

---

As highlighted above, there is great diversity among the selected youth-serving organizations in terms of program emphasis and focus, structure, curriculum, and population served. Rather than focusing on program differences, this study seeks to explore the commonalities of impactful youth-adult relationships across these varying program models. Key findings are presented below, categorized by program level, youth participant, and adult mentor/program staff.

### Program Level Findings

- **Centrality of Relationships** – Stakeholders from each of the four organizations all stressed the importance of relationships as fundamental to the mission of their program. Equally as important was the fact that program staff often spoke about numerous critical relationships in addition to the adult/youth pairing. Other integral relationships included relationships with youth’s family, peer relationships, relationships with younger youth participating in the program, and attachment with the program itself. The youth interviewed expressed a deep bond with the adult volunteer/program staff, but also attached great significance and belonging to the organization itself, which facilitates building relationships with other program staff and volunteers.
- **Intentionality** – A key word used by at least one stakeholder within each participating youth-serving organization was ‘intentionality.’ Intentionality was described as integral to both program and relationship success, *“infused into all our actions and activities . . . and understood by all.”* As such, adult volunteers and staff members hold deliberate, intentional conversations with youth participants that are grounded in a well-formed and well-understood program mission.

- **Balance of Structure and Flexibility** – The four organizations stressed the importance of structure and well-defined rules for program staff members, volunteers, and youth participants. It is critical for everyone to be participating under the same expectations. Staff members discussed the importance of structured activities – with a set beginning, middle and end– while also allowing for flexibility to meet the individual or group’s varying needs of the day.
- **Importance of Training** – While the level of staff and volunteer training varied widely across the four programs, program staff universally noted the importance of and desire for continued or increased training related to theory and effective practices of positive youth development, including relationship building, stages of relationships/mentoring, growth mindset, and program evaluation and youth outcomes.

### **Youth Participant Findings**

- **Be True to One Self and Open to Relationships** – Youth reported that they had a large part to play in developing relationships. First and foremost, it is important for young people to be themselves – not put on a façade – in order to build strong relationships. Youth participants interviewed for this study stressed the importance of being open to the idea of developing new relationships. This means young people being willing to learn more about themselves as well as others. Youth also cautioned their peers to try not to judge others too early in the relationship.
- **Address Meaningful Issues** – High-school students interviewed for this study all mentioned the importance of having someone with whom to discuss difficult subjects, such as relationships, body image, misogyny, violence, Black Lives Matter movement, bullying, and depression. Meaningful conversations about current events or personal challenges tended to deepen the level of trust with their mentor.
- **Engage Fully and Have Fun** – One common message not to be missed is that young people have to enjoy participating in the program and meeting with the adults in their lives for these relationships to work. Multiple youth noted that if it were not fun or enjoyable, they would not be participating. Similarly, adults have to want to be there; youth assured us that they can tell if their adult mentors and program staff are engaged and enjoying themselves.
- **Embrace New Opportunities** – Finally, youth interviewed for this study advised their peers to move out of their comfort zone and try new things, meet new people, and compromise with others. Moreover, youth who challenged themselves by participating in community service activities or acting as role models/mentors for younger youth often developed leadership skills, increased their self-esteem and confidence, and strengthened their level of compassion and empathy.

### **Adult Mentor/Program Staff Findings**

- **Be Caring and Supportive** – Perhaps the most commonly listed characteristics of mentors, whether from a structured or naturally occurring mentoring relationship ,are being warm, welcoming, caring, and supportive.
- **Be Trustworthy and Follow-Through** – Tied directly to a caring and supportive relationship, is the concept of being trustworthy. Trusted adults are dependable, consistent, and reliable. In addition, if adults are not able to follow-through on a promise, interviewees stressed the importance of owning their mistake rather than making excuses.
- **Be Transparent and True to Self** – When discussing why they were able to develop a strong mentoring relationship, the youth interviewed commonly described the adult as ‘genuine’, ‘honest’, ‘straightforward’, and/or ‘real’. They appreciated hearing what the adults really thought, regardless if they agreed with them and recognized that the adults’ advice and intention was in their best interest. Similarly, program staff and volunteers stressed the importance of being themselves and not trying to be what adults may think young

people want them to be. They warned that youth will see through this and you will have lost an opportunity to build a strong, trusting relationship.

- **Empower Youth Engagement and Voice** – Youth participants, mentors and program staff described the importance of actively listening and ensuring that youth feel respected, valued and heard. Moreover, stakeholders also noted the importance of working together through challenges and toward reaching goals, treating each other with mutual respect, and directly involving youth in decision-making. Furthermore, as youth aged, program staff/mentors stressed the goal of increasing youth responsibility over time and building youth leadership skills; all of which, in turn, reinforce and strengthen mentoring relationships and increase positive youth development. Multiple high-school students interviewed for this study reflected on how they built leadership skills through their relationships and engagement with their youth development program and now are drawn to being a leader across other settings.
- **Be Constructive and Challenge Youth to Be their Best** – Research suggests that developmental relationships that set high standards, rather than solely offering unconditional support, produce better youth outcomes (Center for Promise, 2015; Search Institute; Rhodes, 2007). Building off the above finding of youth empowerment, key stakeholders interviewed for this study highlighted the importance of encouraging a growth mindset, offering different vantage points, and challenging youth to improve and do better. It is also important to note that a number of the youth interviewed specifically appreciated being offered constructive criticism balanced by encouragement and recognition of their effort and improvements.
- **Increase Youth Opportunities** – Another key element critical for building and strengthening positive relationships with young people is expanding their possibilities (Search Institute, 2013). Youth interviewees discussed how they were exposed and introduced to a multitude of new experiences, vantage points, and people. These new experiences and networks broadened their mindset and expectations for life. As one youth expressed, due to his mentoring relationship and program engagement, his *“future plan is to step on to a college campus feeling as if I belong.”*

These findings about characteristics of exemplary, high-quality youth-adult relationships are explored more closely in four case vignettes, found on the following pages. It is important to note that the names of the youth interviewed for this study have been changed in order to preserve their anonymity and safeguard their identities.

## Conclusion

---

Through interviews with key stakeholders across four youth-serving organizations, this study explored the commonalities of high-quality youth-adult relationships developed within both formal, structured mentoring programs and youth development organizations where formal mentoring may not be an explicit goal. As such, the highlighted exemplar relationships represented both structured and naturally occurring mentoring relationships. It is important to note that the intent of this study was not to compare or contrast program models or relationship quality. Instead, the goal was to identify common themes or tenets of these successful relationships irrespective of program model or structure.

The largest takeaway of this study is that relationships do matter and can have a substantial impact on a young person's life. High-quality developmental relationships across a variety of settings, whether at home, at school, in the neighborhood or, as in these cases, at youth mentoring and youth development programs, are critical as many young people continue to face a high number of risk factors and adverse childhood experiences. The four case vignettes reveal that there is not a one-size fits all model or structure; impactful mentoring relationships can be successfully developed both formally and informally across varying program models. While the structure and design of the programs may differ, the study highlighted a number of key cross-case findings consistently noted at the program, youth participant and adult mentor/staff level which were integral to the development and growth of these high-quality youth-adult relationships.

Mass Mentoring Partnership (MMP) is well positioned to increase outreach and engagement to youth serving organizations. MMP's continued goal for 2017 and beyond is to build capacity not only at the individual level but on a systemic level to ensure that all young people have access to quality and intentional relationships. Key strategies include developing funding streams that support relationships as a key intervention for positive youth outcomes; supporting policy work that encourages and even mandates that systems attend to relationships; providing direct training and technical assistance to youth serving organizations to enhance the quality of youth adult relationships; and celebrating and bolstering the mentoring programs that have traditionally created one-to-one and small group intentional relationships. MMP's aim is to foster Relationships in Action, as they continue to assess, build, connect and advocate to meet the needs of young people across Massachusetts

## End Notes

---

Center for Promise. (2014). Don't Call Then Dropouts: Understanding the Experiences of Young People who Leave High School Before Graduation. Washington, D.C.: America's Promise Alliance.

Center for Promise. (2015). Don't Quit on Me: What Young People Who Left School Say About the Power of Relationships. Washington, D.C.: America's Promise Alliance.

Civic Enterprises. (2014). The Mentoring Effect: Young people's perspectives on the outcomes and availability of mentoring. A Report for MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership. Retrieved from [http://www.mentoring.org/mentoringeffect/the\\_mentoring\\_effect\\_full\\_report](http://www.mentoring.org/mentoringeffect/the_mentoring_effect_full_report).

Dubois, D.L, Portillo, N., Rhodes, J. E., Silverthorn, N. & Valentine, J. C. (2011). *How Effective Are Mentoring Programs for Youth? A Systematic Assessment of the Evidence. Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 12(2), 57-91.

Dweck, C., Walton, G., & Cohen, C. (2014). *Academic Tenacity: Mindsets and Skills that Promote Long-Term Learning*. Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Heckman, J. J., & Kautz, T. (2013). *Fostering and measuring skills: Interventions that improve character and cognition* (No. w19656). National Bureau of Economic Research.

Rhodes, J. (2007). Fostering Close and Effective Relationships in Youth Mentoring Programs. University of Massachusetts, Boston. Retrieved from [http://www.mentoring.org/new-site/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/RIA\\_ISSUE\\_4.pdf](http://www.mentoring.org/new-site/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/RIA_ISSUE_4.pdf)

Schwartz, S. E. O., Chan, C. S., Rhodes, J. E. , Scales, P. C. (2013). Community Developmental Assets and Positive Youth Development: The Role of Natural Mentors. *Research in Human Development*, 10:2, 141-162.

Search Institute. (2013). The Developmental Relationships Framework. Retrieved from <http://www.search-institute.org/downloadable/Developmental-Relationships-Framework.pdf>

Search Institute (2015). *Don't Forget the Families*. Retrieved from <http://www.search-institute.org/downloadable/SearchInstitute-Don'tForgetFamilies-Report-10-13-2015.pdf>.

Spencer, C and Rhodes, J.E. (2014). Growth promoting relationships with children and adolescents. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 2014(144), 59-72. Retrieved from <http://www.rhodeslab.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Rhodes-Spencer-Growth-Promoting-relationships-2014.pdf>.



Founded in 1963, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Mass/Metro West (BBBS-CM) is a structured, formal youth mentoring organization whose mission is “to provide children facing adversity with strong and enduring, professionally supported one-to-one relationships that change their lives for the better, forever.” Volunteers serve as mentors (Bigs) to elementary and middle school age children (Littles), who are living in poverty, come from single-parent households, or face other types of hardship.

This is one of a series of case vignettes exploring the importance of and central tenets comprising mentoring relationships – both formal and informal – developed within the varied context of youth-serving organizations. For this study, BBBS-CM selected a formal mentoring pair from their community-based program, a 1:1 mentoring program in which Bigs and Littles meet afterschool or on weekends within the community with necessary communication, planning and approval going directly between the Big and the Littles’ parent(s). BBBS requires a commitment of at least one year and requests matches to meet at least 3 times per month during the first year and at least one time per month in following years; though, in many cases, matches meet more frequently over a much longer duration. The average match length for BBBS-CM’s community –based program is 28 months.

BBBS program staff stressed the importance of selecting the right mentors for both the program as a whole and for each youth, specifically. The expectations for all – mentors, youth, and families – must be realistic. In terms of mentor selection, BBBS looks primarily at stability, safety, location, intentions, and commonalities with youth – whether in terms of background, interest areas, or background challenges. Prior to the match, BBBS provides training to volunteers focused on logistics, requirements, expectations, navigating communication with Littles and their parents, relationship building, and stages of mentoring. Furthermore, BBBS staff hold monthly check-ins with both the Big and Little’s parent throughout the first year of match with quarterly check-ins thereafter.

### **The Relationship**

David, a 13-year old white male from the surrounding Worcester area, has been matched with Amos, a 53-year old white male, for over five years. With an absent father, David desperately wanted and needed a male figure in his life. As David explains:

*I never had an adult father figure. My dad left when I was young and I don’t see him much. I had that empty space that Amos filled.*

Due to his family circumstances, David was distrustful by the time he was matched with Amos at age eight. He believed everyone – including his mother – would leave him. As David’s mother describes:

*David was always very stuck to me because I was all he had after his dad left ... He never trusted anybody. ... He would freak out and cry if I was away – even in another room. He always thought once someone leaves, they’re never coming back.*

David needed a reliable, supportive male figure in his life and Amos has provided that. When asked to describe their relationship, both David and Amos spoke in broader terms than role model or mentor; they view each other as family and know they will be part of each other’s lives for the long-term. As David notes:

*When I go to his family, people act like I’m related. We have that kind of bond of relationship. So when people ask, we don’t say he’s my mentor. We say we’re brothers – because our relationship is for forever.*

David and his mother, Jean, detailed many of the characteristics about Amos that enabled formation of this impactful bond. Their descriptors included: caring, trustworthy, genuine, honest, supportive, straight forward, consistent, reliable, fun and funny. They further explained that Amos challenges David – offering him different vantage points and experiences - and pushes him to be his best in a constructive, respectful and supportive manner.

*Amos is funny and we always have fun together no matter what we're doing... He's always there for me – whether in person or on the phone. I know I can call him about anything.*

*We're somewhat different but we both try new things for the other. ... With Amos, I've tried hiking and gone to museums and we're going to a play soon. And we cook together and try new foods, like making smoothies and quiche. ... We make plans together.*

*David trusts him with his whole heart. And that's what he needed ... someone who he could trust and was going to be straightforward and honest with him and that's what he got with Amos. ... He's not afraid to tell him if he's wrong. He'll give him five different views on how he could handle a problem. He doesn't tell him what to do. He gives options, and says you have to decide.*

Amos believes that they were able to build this trust and close relationship through lots of communication, with both David and his mother. *"I feel that this trust has been built on the mundane – not a specific activity – but ... working through things together."* Amos and David have discussed a variety of challenges together, including issues of friendships and bullying in earlier years and concerns about school and teachers in later years. Regardless of the issue, they work together to figure out why it is challenging, how it impacts David and others, and look at from different vantage points to better understand how to improve the situation.

David has gained a great deal through this meaningful relationship. Specific skills and impacts cited include increased connection, competence "feel loved and can do anything", self-confidence and self-worth. David has been exposed to new opportunities, different vantage points, and is more open to trying new things.

*He has brought more happiness and fun into my life. ... I know he is always there for me. ... And he helps me understand things – like math equations – better.*

*Everyone needs an environment which shows you how to act and react. David needed a male figure to trust and rely on. This shows him that males can be committed, trustworthy, and have integrity. I try to teach him the importance of civility and being respectful. ... And show him opportunities to be whoever he wants to be.*

*Amos has taught him a lot. This relationship taught David how to trust and form other relationships. Amos is very caring, honest and trustworthy. And everything he is, he has helped bring out in David. It was always there but he had that wall. ... I don't think David would be who he is today without Amos.*

When asked to provide advice and suggestions to adult volunteers seeking to build strong meaningful bonds through youth development programs, Amos, David, and David's mother offered the following advice:

- Commitment – Be prepared to stay committed for the long term. Youth need and thrive on that dedication and reliability.
- Integrity – Be genuine and real. Follow-through is critical.
- Patience – Relationships and trust take time to build.
- Supportive– Offer praise and support, while also being constructive if they are doing something wrong.
- Engage and Empower Youth – Plan together and have fun together. Compromise with each other and try new things.

Started as a traditional summer camp in the 1930's, Crossroads now offers a year-round experience serving more than 1000 urban youth, in grades 2–12, annually, across multiple locations in north central Massachusetts, the South Shore, and Cape Cod with transportation assistance provided from Boston and Brockton. Programming and activities for younger youth in grades 2–7 center on a residential summer camp experience, while older youth, grades 8–12, are nominated to participate in Crossroads' C5 Leadership program. Crossroads utilizes experiential learning, intentional mentorship, immersion in strong culture, and challenging skill-building experiences to support and impact the program's four key focus areas: social-emotional strength and leadership skills; sense of community and belonging; college access and success; and community action.

This case vignette focuses on the youth adult relationships formed through the organization's C5 Leadership program. To participate in C5, seventh graders are nominated as potential leaders by representatives of either a Crossroads camp or partner, such as a school or a local community-based organization. The five-year program includes both residential summer experiences with other C5 leaders and school-year participation in weekend activities, community service requirements, and introductions to various organizations and companies to expand awareness about upcoming college and career choices. As one C5 participant further explained:

*Crossroads takes city kids and helps them instill leadership into their daily lives through community service, planning activities for younger kids, and setting goals earlier in life ... It's a different environment that allows me to get away from the stress of my regular life. It allows me to step away from school and friends at home and create new bonds ... It helps build friendships, leadership, strength, and self-confidence.*

Annual programming and activities promote the following objectives:

- Year 1: Flint - 8<sup>th</sup> Grade – Character Driven
- Year 2: Lantern - 9<sup>th</sup> Grade – Community Focus
- Year 3: Hammer - 10<sup>th</sup> Grade – Challenge Ready
- Year 4: Compass - 11<sup>th</sup> Grade – College Bound
- Year 5: Medallion - 12<sup>th</sup> Grade – Committed to a Better Future

As one program staff member noted, “*At Crossroads, intentionality is infused into all our actions and activities ... and understood by all.*”

### **The Relationship**

Demitri Curry, an African American male in his twenties, serves as the C5 Leadership Development Coordinator for the incoming 120 first year leaders. As part of this role, Demitri is responsible for interviewing and selecting the C5 leaders, as well as communicating about and attending both Crossroads-sponsored as well as leaders' personal events on weekends and weeknights – such as sports games, talent shows, community events – to ensure that these youth are supported, engaged and committed to the C5 program. “*This is the favorite part of my job ... encouraging them and supporting them with whatever they may be struggling with. ... My goal is to promote buy-in and program engagement especially over the first year.*”

As part of this study, we spoke to two youth leaders, who recently completed their first full year in the C5 program as well as a second residential summer experience leading into 9<sup>th</sup> grade. As youth leaders age up in the program (Flint to Lantern), each cohort is assigned a new Leadership and Engagement Coordinator. As such, Demitri is deeply engaged with all first-year leaders but will see less of this group as they move into the 2<sup>nd</sup> year Lantern group. When asked to select an individual who personifies a close, impactful relationship from the first year of the C5 program, Demitri expressed the difficulty in selecting just one or two students as the program builds leadership skills and relationships for all of its youth leaders. As Demitri noted, an effective mentor needs to “*consistently be there, be understanding, and show support at all times. But I want these youth to think back not about me specifically but that*

*Crossroads was there for them... I have a tough love, big brother approach with all of these students. I have expectations. I want them to see their future. I want them to see in them what I see.”*

During a fall weekend C5 event, I spoke with two ninth grade students currently participating in their 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the C5 program and asked them to discuss and describe their relationship with Demitri. The first student, Ella, is a 14-year-old, Asian American female from Roslindale. Ella attended Crossroads camps from the age of nine and was nominated by her former camp counselors for the position. The second student, Alex, a 14-year-old Latino male originally from East Boston and currently living on the North Shore, was nominated to the C5 program by one of his former middle school teachers. While these two high school students differ from one another in terms of their general personality and interests, there was a great deal of overlap in terms of their connection to the Crossroads program, other C5 peer leaders, and to Demitri , specifically.

They both view Demitri as a role model and mentor, who was easy to develop a meaningful, impactful relationship with due to the following characteristics: being genuine, open, welcoming, non-judgmental, supportive, fair, and fun. They both discussed how Demitri pushes and challenges them to be their best and to always be more engaged with the program and in life.

*Demitri was easy to develop a relationship with because he’s a really welcoming person. He’s like a mentor and role model for all of us. He’s always reached out so we want to reach out to him as well – about good news, or issues at school, anything. I also like that we can talk to him about real world problems. He really connects with all the kids. He’s very caring and open-minded and considers everyone’s opinions. He’s really good at listening. He doesn’t favor anyone. He gets everyone involved.*

*I look up to Demitri. He’s being a role model even when he’s not leading events. He puts a lot of emphasis on respect for each other... He’s very welcoming and not closed off. I can go to him for help on anything, like school, community service opportunities, just life ... And, I enjoy spending time with him outside of the whole class in smaller activities... It’s a good time to bond with him. Demitri’s a lot of fun... and sets a good example.*

*I like the way Demitri handles things. He’s open with people and situations and I’ve tried to apply to myself and have a better growth mindset.*

Furthermore, the meaningful relationship created between these two C5 leaders and their first-year leadership director has helped to foster and promote the following equally important relationships in these two teenagers’ lives:

- **Peer Relationships** – Demitri and Crossroads staff place a large emphasis on building strong, trusting relationships with the other C5 leaders. This is an opportunity to meet and make great friendships. As Alex relates, *“I like the way my peers and I see each other as family. During the summer, we do lots of challenges to build trust for others. We created really strong bonds.”* Ella agrees, *“The activities bring us together and encourage you to be yourself.”*
- **Relationships with Younger Youth** – The program offers numerous opportunities for the C5 leaders to work with the younger Crossroads campers as their direct role models and leaders.
- **Relationship with the Program** – Alex and Ella have both developed a deep connection and sense of belonging with the Crossroads program itself. They described an embedded culture where everyone is welcomed, encouraged and empowered to be themselves.
- **Relationship with the Community At Large** – Community service is an integral component of the C5 program. Each year, C5 leaders are required to perform a set number of community service hours making positive contributions to society while building youth compassion and leadership skills.

Through this meaningful relationship and active engagement in the Crossroads C5 program, Ella and Alex have gained a great deal already and still have more than half of the program ahead of them. Specific skills and impacts cited by Demetri, Ella, and Alex include improved self-confidence, leadership skills, team work, communication skills, and goal setting, as well as increased exposure to the outdoors, willingness to try new things, connection to community and friendships. Demetri emphasizes that this program “*gives youth a voice and an opportunity!*” As Ella and Alex further explain,

*I've learned a lot about myself. The first year of C5 is all about leading ourselves. I've always doubted myself and didn't see myself as a leader. But now I do see it and I step to leadership roles. So far the program has helped me to get to know myself better, my peers, and understand life in general. It's also helped me to think about what I want and to set goals and achieve them.*

*This past summer we went on a five-day trek in the White Mountains with our cabin. We struggled when going through and were very dependent on each other. I didn't realize the impact at the time. But I was proud of my accomplishment, and gained more confidence as well as leadership and team work skills.*

*At the end of each year, we're asked to write a letter to ourselves and set smart goals. I took it seriously and wrote down goals for getting into a Chinese school in Beijing to learn Mandarin. The staff and this program encouraged me and gave me the tools to believe in myself as a leader and set goals. I just found out I got accepted. I'm going next summer... I didn't truly realize until I started C5, how big of an opportunity it provides.*

When asked to provide advice and suggestions to those seeking to build strong meaningful bonds through youth development programs, Demetri, Ella, and Alex offered the following:

To Youth:

- Engage fully and open yourself up to new relationships;
- Be willing to learn more about yourself and others; and
- Be open-minded. Don't be judgmental.

To Adults:

- Be trustworthy;
- Be authentic. Be yourself;
- Be reliable and consistent;
- Be patient;
- Be supportive;
- Really get to know the kids;
- Meet kids where they are at; and
- Have fun and enjoy.

Currently operating in 19 Boston and 3 Springfield public high schools, Scholar Athletes' mission is to reduce the opportunity gap and support student achievement – academically, socially and emotionally - through athletics. Each of the participating schools has a designated learning space, called the Zone, at the school staffed by at least one full-time Scholar Athletes employee. The Zone and its staff members are an integrated part of the school community, working closely with guidance counselors, teachers, coaches, and athletic departments to identify students that may benefit from the program. Moreover, across some sports, all team members are required to attend the Zone for a given number of days or hours per week in order to participate in their given high school sport. For many student athletes, studying and completing homework can be hard to prioritize against games and practices. By creating a designated space within each school where students can study, receive tutoring, or work in groups, academics take precedence.

Scholar Athletes is staffed full-time throughout the school day and after school-hours, providing students with immediate, consistent on-site access to the Zone and its staff members. The organization has three core program areas:

- **Academic Coaching and Informal Mentoring** – including individual tutoring, homework assistance and academic coaching support as informal mentoring and communication between students, program managers, and university volunteers;
- **Health and Wellness** – including inclusive intramural athletic programming for all abilities; and
- **Post-Secondary Planning** – offering guidance and resources on college access and exposure, SAT support, FAFSA information and guidance, program recognition, and scholarships.

Scholar Athletes' program coordinators are 'near peers,' closer in age to students with backgrounds in athletics, to increase relatability and connection with high school students. Along with the program coordinators, Scholar Athletes has dozens of higher education partnerships to support academic and athletic programming through university volunteers. Moreover, the Zone and its staff members are meant to be a resource hub, expanding the students' network of available resources. Staff members serve as a lynch pin or leverage point to students, providing them with a place to start when they are not sure where to turn, whether it be about challenges or concerns with academics, a teacher, or a personal issue. Program coordinators hold deliberate, intentional conversations with students with an aim to improve their growth mindset; encouraging and strategizing with them to increase their efforts – whether in sports, academics or relationships – to believe in themselves and achieve incremental improvements.

### **The Relationship**

Born and raised in Boston, Claude James, an African American male in his early thirties, serves as the Zone's Program Coordinator at West Roxbury High School. Currently serving in his fourth year in this role, Claude knew he was passionate about working with students and had a strong desire to find an occupation that bridged his interest in being in the education field while serving as a strong role model providing advice to students. When asked to identify one of his many student athletes to participate in this study, Claude selected Antwan, a 17-year old African American male currently enrolled in his senior year at the school. Antwan, a football captain, has been a part of Scholar Athletes since his freshman year, as all football players are required to attend the Zone at least three times a week after school before practice during the season. Antwan quickly recognized the benefits of attending the Zone and began attending more frequently, regardless of the season.

*One thing I love about the Zone is the time I have here before practice to get things done. ... It would be a lot harder and I would be overwhelmed without it. ... I try to bang out my harder work here first and leave the easier stuff for later on. So if I know that I have a tough project or assignment, I'll do it here and go to Mr. James for help on it.*

Antwan views Mr. James as a role model and mentor, who was easy to develop a meaningful, impactful relationship with due to the following characteristics: being welcoming, real, honest, trustworthy, reliable, supportive, fair, and fun. He expressed how Mr. James pushes and challenges him to be his best both academically and personally. Discussions between the two often revolve around academics, college, time management, playing football in college, and physical therapy as a college major and future career as well as personal conversations related to friends and relationships.

*Mr. James is like a big brother to me. He's a role model and I trust him to give me good advice.*

*Mr. James helps me to think about how to improve myself academically and personally. For example, I told him I was having trouble with time management, because I need to manage a lot of things like football, being captain, talking to other athletes, school work, work on weekends, and ... the college process. And ... it started to become overwhelming... He helped me and talked to me about creating a list to manage my time better. That was one of the conversations that really stuck with me.*

*For me, what's different is I think that a lot of other teachers or counselors at the school tend to tell me what I want to hear so I stay positive instead of giving me constructive criticism at the same time. And, with Mr. James, he just sounds real honest and that he's giving me truth. It's a good feeling when I speak with him and a good vibe throughout the conversation. And his words just really get through to me. I feel like what he says has the most influence on me.*

Furthermore, this meaningful relationship has helped to promote and strengthen the following equally important relationships:

- **Relationships with Other School Personnel** – The Zone is located in the school's library and has provided easy access and introductions to other school personnel, such as college advisors who are also located near the library. After finishing his homework at the Zone, Antwan often works on his college application and essay with Miss Debbie, the Education Advisor for TRIO Talent Search representative in the building.
- **Peer Relationships** – Antwan really enjoys and is inspired by seeing his football teammates off the field and working in the Zone. He also gains information about and advice from former West Roxbury athletes who keep in contact with Mr. James to learn about their college experience.

*Other athletes, we share the same passion... Having them on field and in the library [Zone] together to make sure we are all academically capable of staying on the team and participating together. It's just a good vibe of having your brothers there. You know that you're not alone doing it.*

- **Relationship with the Program** – Antwan has developed a deep connection and sense of belonging with the Scholar Athletes program itself. He talks about how important Scholar Athletes has been to him, and how others should take advantage of the opportunity.

Antwan has gained a great deal through this meaningful relationship and active engagement in the Scholar Athletes program. Specific skills and impacts cited by both Claude and Antwan include improved academics and grades, time management, motivation, and goal setting as well as improved self-awareness, maturity, relationship skills and communication skills.

*Honestly, I think Mr. James has helped me mature. He helps me have a better understanding of things.*

*It has helped me improve my grades, assignments, homework. ... Teaches me to utilize my time well. He also encourages me to work harder and sign up for harder classes. And I always know there's someone here to help me.*

When asked to provide advice and suggestions to those seeking to build strong meaningful bonds through youth development programs, Claude and Antwan offered the following:

To Youth:

- Engage fully in the program; and,
- Open yourself up to new relationships.

To Adults:

- Be Welcoming – It is important to be someone who students can turn to for issues related to school and sports but also their personal life or any challenges. A welcoming personality helps adults build and foster relationships with students.
- Transparency– Be genuine, straight-forward and open so the students know they are getting real advice and the best knowledge you can offer. Do not try to be who you think they want you to be. Young people will see through this immediately and you will have lost the opportunity to build a relationship. Be yourself.
- Consistent and Caring – A continued, reliable, consistent presence is critical. Be both supportive and constructive.
- Fun with Expectations – Role models need to have a combination of being both fun and serious. Get to know and enjoy yourself with your students. It's good for students to come and enjoy themselves but students also need to know and understand there is a structure, rules, and expectations attached.
- Youth-Centered – At the end of the day, it's always about the student and not about the adult's feelings.
- Engage and Empower Youth – Help build and instill personal responsibility and a personal growth mindset. Don't be a crutch for them; actively involve, engage and empower them in important decisions to improve such things as time management, decision-making, and goal setting.

Started in 1988, Raw Art Works (RAW) is a community-based youth arts organization annually serving more than 600 youth, ages 7-19, in Lynn, Massachusetts. Located about 10 miles northeast of Boston, Lynn is one the Commonwealth's Gateway cities, home to an economically, racially, and culturally diverse population, with household poverty rates approaching twice the state average. RAW utilizes on-site clinical art therapists, professional artists and group leaders to help explore a wide range of artistic media while building relationships between and among program staff, youth participants, and the community. The core value of RAW is that every youth participant should be seen and heard. This is one of a series of case vignettes exploring the importance of and central tenets comprising mentoring relationships – both formal and informal – developed within the varied context of youth-serving organizations.

While RAW offers numerous programs, this study focuses on the informal mentoring relationships formed through the organization's RAW Chiefs program. Briefly, the RAW Chiefs program is a paid youth leadership program in which high school students assist in running group-based programs serving younger elementary and middle school age kids. In this case, Francisco and Emilio serve as RAW Chiefs and work directly with Jason Cruz, their Program Leader, to run a weekly, school-year program, called Boys Lync, for twelve 10-14 year-old middle school boys. The Boys Lync program has a structured beginning (check-in and expectation for the day), middle (project or lesson of the day) and end (discussion and closing) while also allowing for flexibility to meet the group's varying needs of the day. Moreover, intentional art making is a critical component of the program.

*We provide opportunities to challenge kids to even "fail" here, risks that are not gonna kill them. Their process of mixing paint, melting aluminum, using power tools can all metaphorically relate to how they are able to push themselves to try new positive things with support. This can be related to real life choices. It actually gives them an opportunity to reflect back on their process of creating at RAW, working through their fears and failures before their success. This allows them to better address tough life situations in the moment like getting recruited by gangs, peer pressure, racism, suicidal thoughts, or early activity with drugs. They can learn to say 'no' here through art using tools, such as drills and saws, that are scary and realizing that with planning and caution and self-exploration they can create something that helps tell their story.*

*We present themes and ideas that kids can explore - through mixing of colors or finding and placing objects together - and while they're doing that, they start communicating about what's really going on in their life. And because we are trained and can support those that are not, kids feel really listened to and heard here, which is a blessing. ... It's a place where it is safe to try and safe to fail, knowing that's also how you learn. Youth reflect and grow. This is very powerful in terms of teaching both art and life skills.*

### **The Relationship**

Jason, Francisco and Emilio have developed a very powerful, impactful mentoring relationship and the young men look to Jason as both a mentor and a family member. When asked to describe and explain their relationship, Francisco and Emilio explained:

*Our relationship is everything. It's basically like a brother, father, friend and boss relationship in one... But it's not a relationship that's only fun and games. As good of a person as he is, he always points out where we can work on more to better ourselves.*

*We have his full commitment. He interacts with everyone. Everyone knows Jason. But we've always had his focus. He's been with us every week for the last three years as a role model and rule maker.*

Francisco and Emilio are both 17-year-old, Dominican-American males in their senior year of high school. Francisco is a student at the KIPP charter school in Lynn and Emilio is a student at Lynn Vocational Technical Institute. Francisco initially participated in RAW Boys Lync program in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, at the insistence of his older sister, before being nominated to become a RAW Chief for the same group in which he once participated. Conversely, Emilio had no knowledge or experience with RAW prior to high school and instead was truly just looking for a first job. Francisco and Emilio are now entering their 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year, respectively, serving as RAW Chiefs and both are entirely invested in the program due in large part to their program group leader.

During their time at RAW, Francisco and Emilio have worked exclusively with Jason Cruz, a Latino male in his forties, who serves as RAW's clinical supervisor and program group leader. Emilio and Francisco generally spend 7-10 hours spread across three days per week at RAW, attending a RAW Chiefs planning meeting, helping co-lead their Boys Lync middle school group, participating in Project Launch (RAW's college and career access program), as well as additional program planning or RAW related events. Over the years, Jason has increased Emilio and Francisco's roles and responsibilities, often providing overall concepts for the weekly Boys Lync group but encouraging and insisting they lead the group meetings, actively assisting in developing project plans, and building their own relationships with these middle school boys. The underlying focus of each meeting is always on promoting healthy relationships and modeling positive behavior through the arts. The expectation of the group is to talk about feelings and utilize art to help kids communicate.

Emilio and Francisco detailed many of the characteristics about Jason that enabled them to form a meaningful, impactful bond. These descriptors included: caring, trustworthy, sincere, genuine, real, honest, supportive, consistent, reliable, respectful, and fun. They further explained that Jason challenges them and pushes them to be their best in a constructive and supportive manner. And they appreciated having a trusted adult in their lives to hold real, meaningful conversations about difficult topics – such as violence, Black Lives Matter movement, gangs, relationships, bullying, and misogyny – which they in turn address with their Boys Lync group, in age appropriate terms.

*He's one of the most genuine people I've ever met. ... It doesn't sound fake coming from him. Anything he says is always the truth. There's no way around it. I've never felt iffy or froggy about anything he's ever said to me.*

*What I like about Jason is that after he tells you to work on something. Then, after a while, he reminds you 'wow, you've gotten better at this.' And I like to know that because it feels like there's a reason for everything you're working on and doing.*

One of the most poignant examples of the depth of their relationship was Francisco's description of how he seeks out help from Jason for emotional guidance.

*I don't really talk much about myself or my emotions. Jason is really the only sort of person I've ever expressed that to. When my grandfather passed away two years ago, Jason was the only person I talked to about it. I didn't even talk to my sister who was here. I came here unannounced. I needed his support that day. He was there for me even though he was in the middle of a group. He understood that I needed him ...right there and then. Jason really helped me go through a grieving process. He gave me the space and the time. He suggested that I write a letter to my grandfather and that I take one of his pots home and burn the ashes of the paper. It was really something that helped me.*

Furthermore, this meaningful relationship created between these two RAW Chiefs and their Group Leader has helped to foster and promote the following equally important relationships in these two young men's lives:

- **Peer Relationship** – Francisco and Emilio met each other at RAW at the start of their sophomore years, when they were placed together as RAW Chiefs. It is abundantly clear talking with these two young men how much they like and respect one another. As Jason explained, while their personalities and styles are different, they push each other to be their best, learn from each other, and support one another. *“By hearing one speak from a deeper place, the other one starts speaking from a deeper place. Given the opportunity to speak up, they both take it now. ... It's great to watch them support each other and not get caught up in who is supposed to be leading. They're moving together.”*
- **Relationships with Younger Youth** – As co-leaders for their Boys Lync program, Emilio and Francisco are now directly passing down and modeling the behavior and lessons they have learned from Jason to these middle school boys, who they view as their younger brothers. They understand how their actions, attitudes and expressions can impact these boys. Key lessons they try to pass on include 'never judging someone too early' and 'making sure they know that they can be themselves ... as a lot of them suffer from bullying or depression.' One of their proudest moments came this fall when one of their initial Boys Lync members became a first year RAW Chief.
- **Relationship with Art** – While neither came to RAW in search of a connection to the arts, Francisco and Emilio recognize the importance of art to expressing emotions and feelings for themselves and their middle school boys. Below is one such example of the power of art.

*The theme for our art show was “The Truth is” and our group designed a figure of a tin human. ... You had to open the figure up and use a magnifying glass to read all the messages that all of us included. All the boys included their own voice to talk about how they feel and what they are going through. ... It means you never know what someone is going through unless you stop judging, look closely and listen.*

- **Relationship with the Program** – Emilio and Francisco have developed a deep connection and sense of belonging with the RAW program itself. They described an embedded culture where everyone is welcomed, encouraged and empowered to be themselves.

*RAW is another home for me. This is the most welcoming place I've ever been to. I can show up here almost anytime unannounced and someone will be caring and welcoming to me.*

*RAW is the only place I've ever felt like I truly belong. Because of RAW, my future plan is to step onto a college campus feeling as if I belong.*

Through this meaningful relationship and active engagement in the RAW Chiefs program, Emilio and Francisco have matured and grown a great deal and are passing these skills onto younger boys from the community. Specific skills and impacts cited by both Jason, Emilio and Francisco, include improved leadership skills, communication skills, creativity, decision-making, time management and prioritization, more emotional depth and reflection, a general willingness to try things, as well as increased community and friendships. As Emilio and Francisco further explain,

*I used to be the type of person that held everything in and let everything build up until bursting. Jason shows me the importance of keeping my chest clear.*

*I was never a leader before. I always hung around people older than me... I never knew this side of me. I'd never taken a chance to be a leader to someone else and now I'm a leader to kids who are only a few years younger than me. I notice a lot now how much more of a leader I am everywhere.*

*Being a RAW Chief has driven me to be a huge leader in any situation. I feel like I need to be in a leadership position in any group. It's kind of strange. I never thought I would get to this point.*

These characteristics of leadership have certainly been noticed with both Emilio and Francisco being nominated for POSSE scholarships. POSSE is a college access and youth leadership development program that provides four-year, full-tuition support to select student leaders from public high schools to attend POSSE partner colleges and universities.

Emilio and Francisco were part of a group of eight RAW nominees and finalists in this process. Each expressed the concern that he might earn this scholarship, while the other was more deserving. Emilio, in particular, indicated that if he were to be selected and Francisco not, he would step aside to let his friend take his place. Fortunately, both boys were awarded the scholarship and will attend Denison University in Ohio together.

As Jason expounds,

*This work is heavy. You can lose kids to the streets. ... What allows me to do this work is the Francisco's and Emilio' of the world. Because they could have easily chosen a different path. Instead, they are role models to these younger boys ... They made a great deal of sacrifices to choose to be here – to be present emotionally, spiritually, and physically. If they can do it, these little guys can do it ... Thinking of Emilio and Francisco leaving Raw Art Works next year makes me personally sad and emotional but happy for the world that they get these two exceptional young men.*

When asked to provide advice and suggestions to those seeking to build strong meaningful bonds at their youth development programs, Jason, Emilio and Francisco offered the following:

To Youth:

- Engage fully and open yourself up to new relationships;
- Be yourself;
- Stand up for what you believe in; and,
- Move out of your comfort zone and interact with others, meet new people, and try new things.

To Adults:

- Be consistent and sincere;
- Keep it simple and be yourself. Be real. Don't try to be something you are not;
- Follow-through. Say what you mean; mean what you say;
- If you don't follow-through, then at least own it;
- Show respect for each other;
- Don't be judgmental. Offer support and constructive help;
- Don't assume. Step back, listen and ask questions; and,
- Have fun and enjoy time together.