

Caring adults needed as mentors

First Lady Michelle Obama is one. So are many of our greatest modern day sports heroes. I am proud to be one. And Springfield Public Schools has more than 200 of them.

What about you? Are you a mentor to a young person?

The best thing about mentoring is that you don't have to own a business or run an organization to be a mentor. The only requirement is that you have an open heart and an open mind.

There are many excuses that can easily be pulled off the shelf to keep those of us who spend our hours holding down jobs, raising families, struggling to pay bills or any of a host of other time-con-

suming, demanding activities from becoming a mentor. We may even think that as a responsible adult who offers advice and guidance to young people when we come across them, that we are already serving as a mentor to

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young people. There is certainly value in that kind of coincidental mentoring. But it is not enough.

The most effective mentoring occurs when a caring adult sets aside time for the expressed purpose of being with their mentee. The Springfield Public Schools mentoring program, which is run through Springfield Schools Volunteers, asks mentors to commit one hour per week. It's a small investment with a huge return.

These "get-togethers" have no pre-set agenda. There are no discussion topics to adhere to and there is certainly no prescribed "right" way to do it. In fact, the beauty of mentoring is that every relationship is unique and special. I think the best ones are formed when the mentor and mentee agree not to place any pressure on defining their relationship. A natural flow of conversation will eventually net important kernels of information.

Last month, the Massachusetts Mentoring Partnership celebrated our area mentors with a reception at the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame. The reception

doubled as a mentor recruitment party and the organization revealed a startling statistic: More than 600 young people in Western Massachusetts are waiting for a mentor. These are young people who have said "Yes! I want a mentor," only to find no one there to step into their lives.

When I began my tenure as superintendent of Springfield schools, I asked all of my senior administrative leaders to become mentors. I have even asked our teachers to become mentors because I believe in the impact they can have on a student's life outside of their everyday classroom experience.

You don't have to be a teacher or a sports figure or a business owner to be a role model. The best role models in my life have been hard working, upstanding ordinary people who I still regard as my mentors.

If you've never given real consideration to the prospect of becoming a mentor, I challenge you to give it a try. Be the one who makes a difference in the life of one of those 600 youth. Let one of them make a difference in yours.

For more information on becoming a mentor with Springfield Public Schools, call Springfield School Volunteers at (413) 787-7015.

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School days

