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Photo by Dave Roback / The Republican

Masarra Mohammed, 12, a refugee from Iraq, and her mentor, Emily J. Porter, have fun drawing after doing homework at the West Springfield Public Library on Wednesday.

WEST SPRINGFIELD " Emily J. Porter is 26 and grew up in Longmeadow.

Masarra Mohammed is 12 and was born in Iraq.

Today, they are building a friendship here in Western Massachusetts that they want to keep alive for the rest of their lives.

"One hour of homework, one hour of play, " Masarra says, describing the standard agenda of the weekly meetings the two have.

"It (TM)s definitely fun to be a role model and have someone look up to you, " says Porter. "It makes me try my best to be a good example and introduce her to things she (TM)s never experienced before. "

Theirs is an example of scores of mentoring relationships going on across the Pioneer Valley between children and adults of all ages. January marks the observance of National Mentoring Month.

Since October, Porter has also been Western Massachusetts ambassador of mentoring for AmeriCorps, a federal program created under former President Bill Clinton by the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993. She is assigned to the Springfield office of the nonprofit **Mass. Mentoring Partnership**, which identifies itself as the only statewide organization devoted to the support of **youth mentoring** programs.

The organization has more than 165 **youth mentoring** programs under its umbrella. Despite her work, Porter had never been a mentor, before her introduction to Masarra.

Porter volunteered to serve as a mentor and tutor to Masarra who, with her family, is marking her first anniversary in the United States this month.

Since September, when Porter and Masarra first were introduced, they have been meeting at least once a week, usually at the West Springfield Public Library.

A mutual interest in art served as an icebreaker for the burgeoning friendship, according to Porter. After working on Masarra (TM)s homework, Porter and her young charge usually spend time drawing, playing cards or exploring other leisure pursuits.

They also have rented movies from the library, gone bowling and spent time at the home where Masarra lives with her mother, two older brothers and younger sister. The mentor and child, who also share a mutual interest in jewelry, are planning to go roller skating and view the art exhibits at the Springfield Museums.

"We usually meet once a week for two hours, " Porter said. "I wish it was more. "

The two liken their relationship to that of sisters, which for each of them is ideal. Masarra notes that she does not have an older sister, and Porter says that by being the youngest of three girls, she (TM)s never had a little sister.

Porter is a 2002 graduate of Longmeadow High School and a 2006 alumna of Washington University in St. Louis, where she majored in art. After working in the clothing industry in New York, she returned to Longmeadow last year.

She volunteered to serve as a mentor through the Social Action Committee of Sinai Temple in Springfield. The temple has a connection to Jewish Family Service of Western Massachusetts, which also is located in Springfield and worked on the Mohammed family (TM)s resettlement in the United States as refugees from Iraq.

Masarra, who attends West Springfield Middle School, arrived in America by way of Syria, where her family lived for a year after fleeing Iraq. She spoke no English upon arrival, but is learning the language through her schooling.

She says her classes in English, social studies, art and sewing are her favorites. She displayed a membership card to the Jewish Community Center of Springfield, where she said she enjoys playing basketball and swimming.

Masarra says she has built friendships here with several other girls who are from Iraq. She hopes to attend college eventually and become an artist.

Porter said that when she is with Masarra, she is transported back in memory to her own days as a 12-year-old at Glenbrook Middle School in Longmeadow.

"I think (mentoring) mostly has given me an opportunity to hang out with a really awesome kid, " she said. "I feel that I see a lot of myself in Masarra. I (TM)m very excited for when we get older and can look back and talk about now. "

Learn more You can learn more about becoming a mentor by contacting the ***Mass Mentoring Partnership***:  
Online: [www.massmentors.org](http://www.massmentors.org) Call: Katie L. Stebbins, director, Western Massachusetts office, (413) 796-2330 E-mail: [kstebbins@massmentors.org](mailto:kstebbins@massmentors.org)

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***Highlights: Mass. Mentoring Partnership, youth mentoring, Mass Mentoring Partnership, Red Sox***