

FALL RIVER

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Volunteers recognized in honor of National Mentoring Month

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FALL RIVER — Like most adult men in the area, Michael McDonald spent Sunday afternoon watching the New England Patriots get bounced from the NFL playoffs.

What is significant is who he was watching the debacle with.

Assistant Vice President with BankFive, McDonald, huddled near the television with Robert, an eighth grader who attends Morton Middle School. McDonald has been partnered with Robert for just more than a year with the Big Friends/Little Friends program of Family Service Association in Fall River. McDonald first linked up with Robert as a volunteer with school-based SMILES Mentoring Inc. at Morton three years ago.

McDonald was one of a handful of mentors on hand at Government Center Monday as Mayor Will Flanagan recognized the designation of January as National Mentoring Month. Flanagan commended the dedication of volunteers who spend their time with local youth.

"Mentoring helps our young kids stay in school," said Flanagan. "You are their friend and you help them in their time of need."

McDonald spoke of the importance of getting involved in the lives of children. He has witnessed Robert grow from a child

in need of some direction to a polite, focused young adult.

"I've noticed big changes in

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respect," said McDonald. "He's not as boisterous as he was. He's become a better listener. His grades are better. I got involved to make sure that Robert goes to high school."

McDonald said Robert hopes to attend Diman Regional Vocational Technical High School in the fall. He would like to study drafting. In addition to watching sports, the duo enjoys playing tennis together and attending events sponsored by Family Service Association.

"It has really bonded into a good relationship," said McDonald. "There's not one time that I don't meet with him where I don't bring up the importance of school."

The SouthCoast has made great strides in its mentoring endeavors during the last couple of years. According to the Mass Mentoring Partnership, there were 1,000 area youth served by various mentoring programs as of this year. That represents an increase of almost 500 children over the previous two-year period.

Katje Fuson, director of Fall

River operations for SMILES, said that while tremendous progress has been made, there is still a great need for male volunteers. She said that while 63 percent of SMILES mentors are females, 67 percent of children on the waiting list are boys.

"We need to bring the 'men' back into 'mentoring,'" said Fuson.

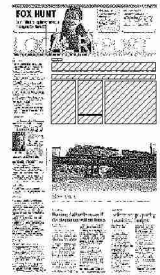
Christian McCloskey, director of youth services for the city of Fall River, has been partnered with 12-year-old Evan for five years with Big Friends/Little Friends. He has also been involved with SMILES for three years. He encourages anyone interested in becoming a mentor to get involved in some capacity.

"It's time to step up to the plate," said McCloskey. "Find out more and discover how important mentoring is and how much of an impact one hour a week can make."

The two veteran mentors agree that simply spending time with a child can have a great impact on his or her life.

"Being there makes all the difference in the world," said McDonald. "There were times at Morton where maybe we didn't even talk that much, but just being there makes all the difference in the world."

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Fall River Mayor Will Flanagan presents a proclamation to Mary Vasconcellos, case manager and recruiting specialist for Big Friends/Little Friends.