

Mentoring fulfilling for volunteers, kids

By **JIM KINNEY**
 Business writer

WEST SPRINGFIELD – Sometimes Christopher J. “C.J.” Denno, a sophomore at the Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Collaborative here, shows Fire Lt. Robert A. Manchino the latest building project he’s working on in his shop class.

Sometimes, they take a walk around the school.

But, mostly they just talk. They did a lot of that last year when Denno’s father died.

“It’s good to have someone to talk to in school,” Denno, 15, said. “I like him. It’s like having a friend.”

Denno is among 10 students at the collaborative who have volunteer mentors drawn from the community. The mentors use work time, an hour a week, to meet with their students.

Some, like Manchino, are firefighters or police officers. Five of the mentors are employees at Southworth Co. in Agawam.

Joseph M. Thomas, a buying planner for Southworth, said participating as a mentor would be very difficult for him if he wasn’t able to take time out of his workday. His own children are 13 and 9 years old.

“So when I leave work, I’m immediately tied up with practices and homework and din-

ner,” Thomas said. “It would be very hard for me to break away at night to volunteer.”

Susan I. Martin, an administrative assistant at Southworth, said the company is always involved in community activities and this is her way of being a part of that effort.

Martin mentors a girl at the collaborative. A mother of boys, Martin said her mentee’s interest in fashion design and marketing was a welcome change.

“It’s girly-girl stuff,” Martin said.

Katie L. Stebbins, Western

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 Massachusetts director of the Massachusetts Mentoring Partnership, said Baystate Health and MassMutual Financial Group each have their own programs on their campuses. Big Y Foods Inc. is developing a mentorship program, Stebbins said.

Each of the Five Colleges in Hampshire county also has a mentoring program for employees. Springfield College has had a mentoring program for 15 years, she said. American International College and Western New England College also have students who mentor, Stebbins said.

Stebbins describes her organization as a “chamber of commerce” for mentoring, bringing agencies that need

mentors together with sources of volunteers.

Participants take a class and go through a background check. At Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Collaborative the mentoring takes place on school grounds during school hours.

Stebbins said the only other requirement is a commitment for at least a year.

“The student I mentor didn’t talk to me for three months,” she said. “Now I can’t get him to stop talking. But it was hard for him to feel comfortable.”

She also requires that mentors be on time every week.

“It is that simple,” Stebbins said. “Because a lot of these kids have disappointment in their lives over and over again.”

Maurine A. Albano, mentoring coordinator at the collaborative, said she’s looking for more mentors who are in the skilled building trades taught at the school.

Steven Vandal, maintenance manger at Southworth, said the student he mentors has showed him the skills he has mastered in his property management trade classes, including small-engine repair.

“I’m just amazed by what those kids are doing,” Vandal said.

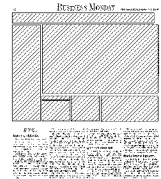
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LEARN MORE

Your business can learn more about starting a mentoring program by contacting the Massachusetts Mentoring Partnership.

Online: Go to www.massmentors.org

Contact: Katie L. Stebbins, director, Western Massachusetts office, (413) 796-2330, kstebbins@massmentors.org





Staff photo by **DAVE ROBACK**



Staff photo by **JOHN SUCHOCKI**

Southworth Paper Co.'s employee mentors include, above from left, Steven Vandal, Guy F. Waterman, Susan I. Martin, Cheryl M. St. Martin and Joseph M. Thomas. At left, West Springfield Fire Department Lt. Robert A. Manchino, left, mentors C. J. Denno at the Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Collaborative.