

Mentoring: A Special Kind of Friendship



*Waimalu Elementary
School 4th grader
Deeana Lebrija and her
mentor Lyn Yoshioka.*

With a sales business she manages from home, Lyn Yoshioka of Aiea has the luxury of a flexible schedule. But there's one appointment that takes priority every week. On Thursday mornings, she drives the short distance to Waimalu Elementary School and spends an hour with 4th grader Deeana Lebrija.

Lyn is a volunteer mentor with Common Grace, a nonprofit organization that arranges partnerships between public elementary schools and local churches. Led by former youth minister Jay Jarman and a board of directors from religious and educational communities, Common Grace provides opportunities for caring adults to

by Mary Young

provide encouragement and support to individual children, grades K-6.

Deeana has gained confidence and a more positive outlook, according to her mentor: "When I first met Deeana, she said, 'I'm shy,' but I've seen her blossom—and I've seen her take leadership roles," said Lyn. Lyn adds that mentoring is rewarding for her, too. "It really gives me a heart for children who need an auntie or an uncle," she said. "Because I don't have children, I wasn't sure how a child would relate to me."

Various organizations offer mentoring

to children on Oahu, including public-private partnerships, military units, religious and community organizations. Perhaps the best-known is Big Brothers Big Sisters of Honolulu, a well-established program that pairs individual mentors and mentees. "I'm a big fan of Big Brothers Big Sisters," said Jarman, the founder and executive director of Common Grace. "But I think there's something wonderful about a relationship between two peer community institutions, a public school and a local church. Lots of good things happen in that partnership."

The idea for Common Grace came in the aftermath of the Columbine High School shootings in 1999. Jarman, who was a storyteller in public elementary

schools, approached a local high school principal and asked how a similar tragedy could be prevented from happening in Hawaii.

"He said the shooters up in Littleton, Colorado, didn't have any adult friends," Jarman recalls. "That's what made them so angry, so alienated. He said if people of good will from the community would simply come to our campus and spend time and make friends with our peripheral students—if those students had one adult that they knew cared whether they lived or died or whether they succeeded or failed, just one person that would be proud of them if they did good—then we would never have that kind of tragedy at our high schools."


"So I took that to heart, and what I realized is that it has to start at a much younger age." Jarman's primary task is to seek out churches that are willing to provide volunteer mentors. Dennis Arakaki, the community relations director, then takes the lead on facilitating meetings between the pastors and the principals of the partner schools. Common Grace personnel complete the screening and train the volunteers in mentoring. There is no religious agenda and mentors understand that. The school assigns a coordinator from the faculty or administration who then selects the children, matches them with the available mentors and tracks the progress of each mentor-mentee pair.

Lyn and Deena's partnership has worked so well that they have been together for three years. (Adult volunteers are expected to commit for one school year, but this can be extended.) Deena said she hopes "Auntie Lyn" will be her mentor through sixth grade. "I like when she comes here and spends time with me," said

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Deeana. "And I like when she reads books to me, and we eat lunch together, and play games."

As defined by the National Mentoring Partnership (www.mentor.org), mentoring is "a structured and trusting relationship that brings young people together with caring individuals who offer guidance, support and encouragement aimed at developing the competence and character of the mentee...a mentor is not a foster parent, therapist, parole officer, or cool peer." The structure in the relationship starts with simply being there for the child, or arranging for a substitute if it's necessary to miss a session. But Common Grace mentors are also given guidelines for planning "an hour


well spent."

"The first 15 minutes are just enjoying conversation with that child and asking how their week has gone and what happened," said Jarman. "We all believe that's the most important part of the hour, just listening to the children." Thirty minutes of learning follows—usually non-academic reading. "They get to choose something they want to read that's fun for them," said Jarman, "Recreational reading, so they can love books in the presence of somebody that loves them."

The last 15 minutes are playing, which might be an activity like putting together a jigsaw puzzle, playing checkers, or tossing a frisbee.

All mentors are required to respect church-state separation: no preaching. "Parents and guardians have to understand you're not trying to run any kind of a religious agenda on the child—you're not trying to drag the child or the family to this or that church," said Jarman.

Since its beginnings at Kaimuki Christian Church, Common Grace has brought together 39 church-school partnerships on Oahu, with two more forming on Kauai this year. Jarman said that the children selected from the schools are not necessarily behavioral problems or underperforming students. "They're kids who need encouragement, and the encouragement comes from friendship with an adult who gives them time and care and personal attention." Page 9 of the organization's training manual sums it up. The entire page consists of one sentence, printed over and over: "A child who is always asking for attention needs attention."

For more information, visit www.commongrace.org 

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