

# EAST SHORE

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M. Diane McCormick

COMMENTARY

## Wanted: mentors to guide our youths

This Thursday the Mentoring Partnership of Central Pennsylvania hosts "Mentoring on the Move," an information fair at Strawberry Square in downtown Harrisburg. Drop by from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., and meet people from 20 organizations that are hungry for grown-ups who can spare their time and talents to help kids.

That got me thinking: From a kid's perspective, what exactly is a mentor?

There are parents — hopefully. There are teachers, who do their best but have dozens of kids to worry about. There are faith leaders, for kids whose families have raised them in a church, synagogue or mosque.

Get the picture? A mentor is a wonderful proposition — if a child is lucky enough to have one. Apparently, there are more kids than mentors to go around.

"I always encourage people to think we all are mentors," said Craig Dalen, program manager for Messiah Village's Harrisburg Institute, facilitator of the Mentoring Partnership. "You should never underestimate the power a relationship can have, especially in a young person's life, especially the care and authenticity that a mentor can bring."

Through the Mentoring Partnerships, 35 organizations in Dauphin, Cumberland and Perry counties support one another, share resources and provide training in the never-ending quest to pair the right adult with the right kid or kids.

Mentoring, I began to realize from my conversation with Dalen, is whatever and wherever you want it to be. There aren't many people — myself included — with the gumption to pair up with a kid through Big Brothers Big Sisters. But maybe we can read to a classroom. Or tutor someone after school. Or teach a bunch of kids to garden.

The mentoring network, and this Thursday's event, help mentors find opportunities that interest them and match them with children who share those interests.

"There are adults that have interests in things and kids that are curious about things," Dalen said.

OK, I'm starting to get this. I knew in junior high that I liked to act and perform. In high school, one of my teachers — Mr. Casey — helped me learn the craft, cast me in challenging parts and guided me through speech team competitions. I never won that Oscar, of course, or even chose a life upon the wicked stage, but Mr. Casey helped build talents that I've used all my life.

Children know what interests them, but if someone doesn't teach them to harness their talents, what then? Those are the ones, sadly, who make the news every day — and not for their accomplishments.

Mentoring isn't just for inner-city children, and it's not just for younger kids, Dalen reminded me.

Organizations in the Mentoring Partnership deal with children from birth through 18. Stacks of research show the benefits — better grades, social skills and boosted self-confidence.

Dalen remembers a time in college when he was on "a wayward path," and a professor spent time talking to him every week. "He never provided answers. He just showed interest."

Mentoring is a way to return the favor, Dalen said. For instance, he is a Big Brother.

"There's no better way to feel connected to the community than knowing I've invested in a child's future," he said. "I've worked with youth over the years, and any time you can see their eyes light up to the excitement of what lies before them is very rewarding."

Can't make "Mentoring on the Move"? Click the "Visitors" and "Current Projects" links at [www.messiah.edu](http://www.messiah.edu), and find a nifty map flagged with mentor-seeking groups near you, from Dauphin County Parks and Recreation to the Pennsylvania Immigrant and Refugee's Women Network.