



Mentors That Matter

Mentors That Matter is a national project in which youth from four United States cities publicly honor the adults who matter in the lives of teenagers, beyond the home and classroom.

Sponsored by MetLife Foundation, Mentors that Matter is an initiative of What Kids Can Do, Inc. (WKCD), a national nonprofit whose mission is to bring forward the voices of youth about their lives and learning.

In Chicago, Providence, San Francisco, and Tampa, high school students worked to identify, interview, and photograph people in their communities who reach out to youth in ways that far surpass what their daily routines require. The resulting narratives and photographs were displayed in a public setting in each city, where, at a celebratory event, students presented each Mentor with a medal of honor.

Through the Small Schools Workshop in Chicago, students from Academy for Communications and Technology (ACT) Charter School and from Social Justice High School at Little Village Lawndale High School Campus took part. In Providence, Rhode Island, student participants came from Central High School and the Met Center. San Francisco students from Leadership High School took part, along with others from the Youth Leadership Institute. In Tampa, the Mayor's Youth Corps took on the project. Each student group had an adult adviser as well as assistance from WKCD.

Selected essays and photographs from the exhibitions in each city appear in the book *Pass It On: Interviews by Youth with Mentors That Matter* (forthcoming, Next Generation Press). For more information, contact info@nextgenerationpress.org.

SPONSORED BY

MetLife Foundation

PRODUCED BY

WHAT
Kids
CAN DO



Young people really do need to vent, and I often get a lot of that. I try to overlook the pain and anger. I still embrace this person as a person that is special to me.

“Us” and “Them”

When I went to high school, I already had an idea in my mind that I wanted to work with young people. I was working with the youth program in my church. We had a boys club and I was helping out with that, and during the summers I served as a camp counselor. A lot of my activities were more focused around the church than school. But I didn't know how you could earn a living doing it.

Now I'm full time in ministry, which I didn't imagine when I was a teenager. I went to school to study insurance. As I was getting ready to graduate, I worked in the career counseling center, helping other students get resumes together and set up interviews. The person in charge said, "Dream and think outside the box. If there is something you want to do and you don't see a position for yourself, create it." That just turned a light on in me. I enjoyed business, but it wasn't exactly what I wanted to do. I wanted to work more closely with people, rather than just shuffling papers around. That opened up a door to go right into ministry, working with high school students.

Working with young people is a passion for me. We run a high school club on Friday nights. We do a conference in Iowa at the end of the year for the high school students. I am actively involved in camping. I mentor a lot of high school students, trying to help them get prepared for what they want to do in life.

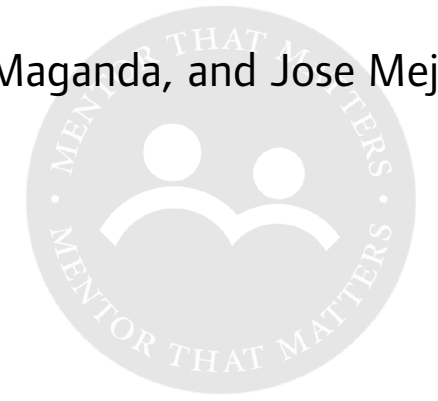
It was a natural progression. I went from being one of the young people to one of the staff helping

young people. When I was at camp as a teenager, there was a fellow named Joe Washington. I learned a lot from him, by watching what he did. He wasn't one that would sit down and give you ABC type instruction. He was pretty consistent and firm, and yet he was real gentle and had patience in how he was doing it.

A lot of young guys I work with, they are angry with their dads who are absent and are not there. Young people really do need to vent, and I often get a lot of that. I understand it a little bit, but it still hurts. How do I deal with it? I try and overlook the pain and the anger. I still embrace this person as a person that is special to me.

I was mentoring a young man who is now a pastor. I was encouraging him to preach and he was trying to make this transition from being what he called "us" and "them." "Them," he said, was "all you adults." He explained, "We as teenagers don't necessary want to associate ourselves with adults too soon, because then it makes us have a hard time relating to our peers." He decided to go into ministry full time, and I am really proud of that.

Young people today has gotten burned a lot and they don't trust adults. But I try and tell them, "Don't let anybody stop you from your program." When you get too cynical and angry, it will stop you from doing what you need to do. You have got to have commitment. Learn how to commit yourself to something. Work hard.



Part of Their Solution

When I was a teenager I grew up in a gang- and drug-infested community. I was misguided, and I also had a lot of family problems and legal problems. I was placed in juvenile probation.

One person I had a lot of respect for was my probation officer. She always treated me with a lot of respect, and she was there when I needed the most help. I always looked up to her. So I became a probation officer, and I'm pretty much like her now.

I wanted to come back and help teenagers that had the same problems that I had—to work with them to get away from gangs and drugs, to get educated and succeed in life. A lot of teenagers are in need. Many of them are being misused by adults. They have a lot of issues. And the problems of gangs and drugs aren't going anywhere.

For seven years I've been working in the Little Village community, and it continues to be a very rewarding challenge. I do gang intervention, drug intervention. I advocate for kids in court. I also provide individual counseling about drugs, gangs, school, anything. If a kid can't go to a school because of a gang-related issue, I find another school or get them into a GED program. If a kid has a lot of drug problems, I get them to outpatient or inpatient care.

If kids have problems with their families, I try to talk to them and solve those problems. I understand that families are making a lot of sacrifices financially.

Many of them migrated from Mexico to come here to live a better life. But they have problems with their kids. I step in, and I get to be part of their solution. When I help their family, it fulfills their dream. It gets them in the right direction and it makes me feel good. That's the best part of my job.

Once we give kids the help, it's up to them to do the right thing with it. I'm proud to say that a lot of my kids have been able to get their GED. They are in school, they are not abusing drugs, and they are making better decisions. That, for me, is success.



Many families migrated here to live a better life. But they are having problems with their kids. I step in, and when I help, it fulfills their dream.



I've Been Knowing Them for a Long Time



We talk, they tell me about things going on at home in their lives, their friends. I really like the kids. I'm probably like their second mom, I guess. I kind of look out for them.

I am a school bus driver. I'm pretty much gone fourteen hours a day, driving from six in the morning to six in the evening. I sometimes spend more time with the teenagers on my bus than I do with my own daughter. I pick them up and take them to school. We talk, they tell me about things going on at home in their lives, their friends. And then I take them back home.

I started driving the school bus in 2002. I was tired of being a nurse assistant and, I was just looking through the paper one day and I seen an ad for school bus drivers. I really like the kids, so I guess that's why I've been doing it for so long. I'm probably like their second mom, I guess I can say, because I've been knowing them for a long time and taking them back and forth to school. I kind of look out for them and make sure they get to school safe and get home safe.

When I was a teenager I spent a lot of time with my aunt, and with my family and friends. When you hang around older people, they show you a lot of things and teach you a lot of things. I learned how to be independent, work hard, and take care of family, because family means everything. I'm there for my family all the time, if they need me to do things for them, like take my grandmother back and forth to the doctor.

Teens are very smart, and they act like they know everything. I guess they are more independent than we were when we were younger. They have more freedom than we had, and they have a lot more stuff, like cell phones and credit cards. It was not like this when we

were growing up. We pretty much had to rely on our parents. This generation, they really pretty much handle themselves. But I try to tell them they don't know everything.

Being around the young kids makes me feel younger and keeps me more alive and wanting to go to work. My job is very easy, but it also can get difficult if the kids is not nice. The kids being very nice and respectable, that makes me motivated to keep going. Some of my kids that move on and go away, we still talk. Sometimes we'll get together, maybe go out to the movies or just sit around and talk.

I tell kids: Just stay in school. Whatever goal you want to accomplish in life, just don't let nobody tell you that you can't do it. Just keep striving. Keep going on.



Do Not Let Them Tell You That



Young people have the power to do what adults cannot. They surprise me every day, with the professionalism they show.

A lot of adults just talk and talk, and never pay much attention to where young people are, or care what teenagers go through. Youth in Action got started nine years ago by four young people and an adult, who wanted a place where young people had a voice. We wanted to create an organization where everything youth think is taken seriously.

To this day, the students who work with us are part of all of the decision-making we do. They really are committed. They run the organization, they sit on the board, they create programs, they do a lot of the fundraising. They surprise me every day, with the professionalism that they show. Every young person who comes through is impacted by what they do.

We put you through a training process. You choose the programs you are more excited about, and after school you get prepared to teach a workshop, like the nonviolence workshop. You are part of the workshop before teaching it to younger kids, with a team of other people your age. You tell about your personal experiences, and through this work you develop your speaking skills. We put people through different exercises until they get comfortable with their ability to stand before a group. Later, you may speak at a conference, and people will listen. It will be a little scary, but you will do it and you will do well.

I tell young people: Do not let them tell you that you cannot do this. Do not start believing negative things, like “My scores are too low,” “I’m not pretty enough,” or “I am not good enough.” We really try to

support every young person, no matter what point in their lives they are in. Sometimes people are in crisis situations and I have felt powerless to help, and worried what would happen. These are the most difficult moments. But even during these moments, people get through, if you stay with them.

Kids coming in may be very shy, not wanting to talk and not comfortable in groups. They may have anger, for whatever reason. Three or four years ago this tall young man comes in, very intimidating. He never smiled in a public setting. He didn’t even want to apply for college. We encouraged him to realize the potential he had. Now he is the leader of one of our teams, and one of our best public speakers. He talks to middle school kids about nonviolence. He is just so talented, and he smiles all the time. I just found out he got into Northeastern, and he is totally excited about going to college.

I believe that young people have the power to do what adults cannot. Four years ago, students raised over half a million dollars to purchase and renovate our four-story building. We work on the first and second floor, and we rent the top floors. So young people here are landlords—they own property and they really do care about the building.

I am young enough to remember what it is like to be your age. I really respect youth. Kids will push me, too, when I do not know if I can do something. I get as much back as I give, or more.



You have the voice. If you do not tell your story, someone else will. You know your story better, and you can tell it best.

Stories Are Breathing

Working at a day care center in South Providence, I discovered storytelling as a teaching tool. I would ask children questions: “You ride a bike, what color is your bike? Where do you bike? You had an accident, and you had stitches—tell me that story.” After that, they got to tell their own story again, but this time I would not ask the questions. I want people to realize: You have stories, you have the voice. If you do not tell your story, someone else will. You know your story better, and you can tell it best.

When I was growing up, my parents were separated, but there were positive male role models around that helped me to get through rough spots in my life. I realized how important it was for young children to have male teachers. There are enough men out there with basketballs, hockey sticks, with weapons. But we do not see men promoting nurturing things: reading, education.

I think we all need more mentors. I could find trouble as a kid, but I had to go look for it. But for you kids, trouble comes knocking at the door, trouble comes on the computer, trouble comes over the phone. So I try to find stories that help people deal with their lives, the rough spots that face students today. There are some wonderful tales from Africa dealing with strength. People confuse strength with being a bully. A bully has a crack in his character, and a crack is a weakness, not strength. Real strength is about the inner self.

I encourage young people to interview their parents and grandparents and listen to their stories. When we connect to the elders in the community, we can get wisdom. There is an African saying, “When elders die, it is like a library burning.” No matter what culture you are from, your ancestors told stories. So when we tell stories about our weekend, we are doing something that people have been doing ever since the beginning of time. People have always eaten and they have always told stories. That connects us to our history.

I have been telling stories for thirty years. I do not care how old the listeners are, you can feel and see how they, too, experience the story. You are not passively listening, you are actively participating, you are using your imagination. You have to visualize the characters, the movement—and on top of that, the empathy that you may have for the character, the wondering, the trance that we go into as we listen. It’s a lot of work for the mind. You sit listening to a story, you get tired!

That is why stories are so important, as opposed to sitting and watching television or music videos. All that stuff has stimulation. Stories are breathing. You are affecting the stories. Feel that! Think that!



Cooking Teaches You to Think Ahead



Conducting business the proper way means being a good person, not trying to get over on people. You treat them with respect.

I hated school. I did pretty good in it, I just didn't like it. It didn't keep my interest. I was kind of like the ringleader. But I was good at cooking. Some people have a gift, that's my gift.

I was poor when I was a kid. I started working when I was thirteen, washing dishes and scrubbing floors and washing out pots and pans. You work at that job for a couple years, then you get a promotion to flipping hamburgers and cooking French fries. After that I just picked it up, and I started working at my uncle's and father's restaurant, too. I got a lot of training there. I learned the hard way and became successful by working extra hard.

I ended up working right away after high school, for different operations, like Pawtucket Country Club. When I was eighteen, I moved to New Hampshire, right near the mountains. I worked for the Marriott for thirteen years in the food and beverage department, opening up hotels throughout the country. My uncle and father taught me how to save money, and to invest the money I earned. Now I have two restaurants [Meritage in East Greenwich, Rhode Island, and Chardonay's in Seekonk, Massachusetts].

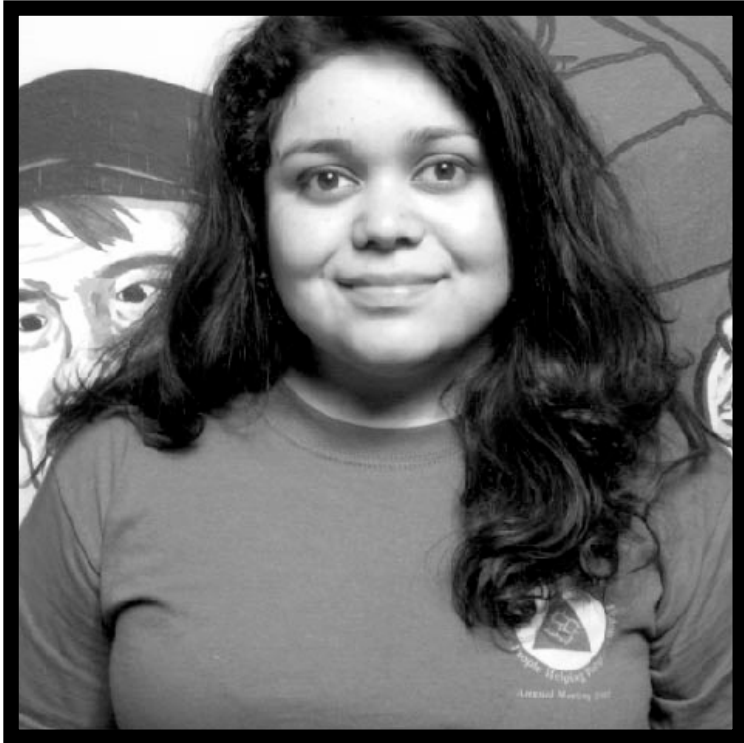
Managing restaurants is very difficult, 'cause you're working with people every day of the week. Conducting business the proper way means being a good person, not trying to get over on people. If some-

one works for you, you pay them. And you treat them with respect.

Cooking teaches you how to plan out things, to think ahead. You have an idea and place it into play, and create a great dish that people would like. You have to know math to extend recipes. You also have to research the products that you're going to buy for certain dishes—you have to be able to get the product, and it has to be cost effective. And you have to know how to prepare the raw product. You have to have great taste buds, so the dish is good. Then you have to teach the dish to the cooks that work for you, and check the dish periodically, so it remains as good as you created it. When you cook you have to please people—it's a lot easier in life if you are in harmony. So you also have to compromise when cooking.

You get to a point in life when it's not about the money, it's about giving back to the community. If I can help someone that is young and trying to improve themselves, maybe I can make a difference in someone's life. I would be happy if someone said, "I remember going to Steve's restaurant, and I'm a chef now because of him."

CELINA RAMOS
Youth credit union
program coordinator
Interviewed by **JOSHUA POONER**



“I’m creating an environment where they can feel free to talk about anything.”

BEANS AND RICE FOR DINNER

I learned early that it’s an essential thing to save money. My sister and I come from a single-parent household. My mom worked every day in a restaurant, from 9 a.m. to 11 p.m. She worked all her life just to provide for us. We lived really tightly; my mom was really careful with her money, but she wasn’t able to save for us. We went to live in Salvador for a little while, because of our money situation. But after thinking it through she decided to come back, because she knew that we would be better off in the long run, even if we were eating beans and rice for dinner.

When I was about seventeen, I moved into low-income housing. The community center right next to it wanted youth to participate in creating a new program, and my mother forced me and my sister to go. I was the oldest youth they had, so I became the leader, developing programs for young people—arts, academics, how to apply for college, stuff like that. I got my beginning working with young people there.

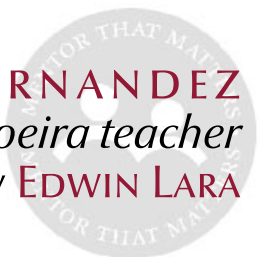
Our youth credit union program revolves around economic development. It’s important for young people to know how to handle money, because schools don’t teach that kind of stuff. It’s not a requirement to learn how to balance checkbooks, or how to save money early. Unfortunately, a lot of families are trying to make their dollars stretch to pay rent and buy groceries. It’s difficult for them to start saving money, and they don’t tell their children to start saving. If we want our young people to become adults that manage their money the right way, it’s important that they know how to do it. Just a little saving can help you in the long run. It breaks the cycle of poverty, of thinking that you have to spend the money that you have.

Working here has actually made me improve my own way that I handle my money. If you don’t save money, how can you tell other people these things? Now I have to get busy with my own stuff and make sure that it’s structured.

I think I always had a good connection with young people. It doesn’t just revolve around money. If they have other issues, then we can’t work on the important issues that we focus on here. So we need to talk about those other things, too. Sometimes they need help figuring things out—family, gangs, sexuality. All of them are really responsible, and they know that I’m serious about wanting to help. I’m creating an environment where they can feel free to talk about anything. I would love to keep doing it for a long time to come.

I would like to bring closer the youth, the adults, and the elderly of the community. Parents and elders can create change in the community, by learning new things. When they look at youth and see what their situation is, they stay connected to what’s happening.

ANDRES FERNANDEZ
Capoeira teacher
Interviewed by EDWIN LARA



"I always wanted to reach out to young people. Capoeira gave me a method to do it."

I'M RIGHT WHERE I WANT TO BE

I came into this country from an immigrating family. It was six, seven of us on a street corner, living on a couch. I became a man when I was six years old. That's when I remember making adult decisions, and I felt my childhood just disappear. My goal was to make it and live the next day.

Ever since I was little, I've always lived in my mind. I believe strongly in imagination. What would it be like to reach to the moon? The imagination grew, and now the moon isn't that big of a deal, now it's Mars. Imagination is what makes us desire and reach things, throughout history.

I always wanted to reach out to young people. Capoeira gave me a method to do it. I was 20 or 21, and I was pretty much lost. Then I came in to a class and saw the way the kids were responding to the art, to the movements, to the discipline. Capoeira is a Brazilian martial art, a dance that slaves brought from Africa to Brazil. They used it to pass the time, and people started adding kicks, punches, back flips. It became this amazing martial art. And it just triggered a light in me. I was the oldest in the class, double the average age, and I'm learning along with them.

Now I teach capoeira at the Mission Cultural Center. I have a lot of at-risk kids with low self-esteem. Through the art I can actually help them to have trust and faith in themselves, to find that inner strength that we all have, to prevail against all those forces that try to crush you. I also try to teach them discipline and create a positive network, everybody getting together and working together. I bring a lot of ideas. I'm like a big kid, so I play with them.

Nobody notices how tall they get throughout the year, unless they mark their height on a wall. Wait a year, and you realize you did grow. When you're training capoeira, it's the same way. I see a lot of frustration when people have been with me for about a year. You're getting better and you don't see it. Other people do, but you don't. They don't realize that they are more body-built. I work a lot on that, and on developing relationships and making friends. Being not only honorable and amiable, but the type of person that has weight to their words. You say something, people automatically know you are going to do it.

Right now in the community there are a lot of bad influences. The more you beat people up, the more girls' numbers you get, the cooler you are. The more people you take advantage of, the cooler you are. That's just not good with me. We need the kind of people who actually are cool, and look out for you. That's what I'm working on with my students.

Kids need something to focus them, to bring them back to reality, to get them out of bad influences. They need someone to be there and support them. They want somebody to actually give them the discipline, because that's something they crave. In the Mission, I'm right where I can teach these kids to progress and become an effective community. I'm right where I want to be.

NAOMI WRIGHT
Assistant, after-school program
Interviewed by PRISCA CHENG



“Working here gave me an appreciation for how difficult it is to be a parent as well as how difficult it is to be a kid.”

FRAGILE BUT DANGEROUS

When I was a kid it was a whole different world from what you see now. Now people put low expectations on youths. More people tell them, “You can’t do it.” Everybody can grow. If it’s someone who’s getting an F, he can raise it to a D. They can change and learn how to deal with their anger and frustration. They just lack self-esteem and a goal.

I used to teach youths in the city about the ecology of the Muir Woods. A lot of them didn’t have cars, and most of them had never left the city. It was just great, showing them a whole different world that is only about thirty minutes away. From that, I just realized that I want to work with youth.

Now I am in charge of the day-to-day operations of the after-school program in James Denman Middle School. I live in the Sunset, and it’s weird: You go to different neighborhoods where they put a lot more money and investment in the schools. There’s no lights by our basketball courts, so the kids can’t play after dark. Environment matters; it shows the investment they have in youth. I don’t know if they just have more faith in the youths in other neighborhoods. In San Francisco, they track you from middle school and on to the opportunities you will have in life. I don’t feel it’s fair.

I don’t see a lot of adults stepping up even though they are not parents. Every adult should be helping a child, helping them grow as people. In some way, it is your responsibility. I don’t have kids, but this is just how I feel.

Working here gave me an appreciation for how difficult it is to be a parent as well as how difficult it is to be a kid. When I was a girl, to gain power and be important in the world, your goals were to become a doctor or a lawyer. It seems like young girls now try to get attention or power through dressing. It doesn’t seem like there is a lot of positive influences in youth life today.

I love middle school and high school, because they are able to look at things in different ways. They’re learning who they are as people. They’re fragile and dangerous at the same time, like firecrackers. You set them off, and once you do it is really really beautiful. Everybody can see them shine.



God-Sent Mom

I grew up too fast. We lived on a plantation, so I just wanted to grow up and get out. I had a sweet mom, but our father left us at a young age. A lot of things that we wanted to do, my mom couldn't afford it. But I always said, "When I grow up, I'm going to be a mom for other kids that their moms can't afford to have things." All through my life, that's what was on my heart. I want to be there for children.

When I heard about foster parents, it would always be something about the kids getting thrown out, the father wasn't taking care of them and the mother was real young. One Friday I just started attending the classes. After about five years, these lil' kids came through and I was lucky enough to get them. Those was my first kids. Oh, Lord, by now there must be hundreds. And it just filled a gap in my life.

It doesn't take much for kids: You have to hug and you have to make them feel safe. They might come to you all disturbed, but once they feel safe, then some mischievous come out, some behavior problems come out. But whenever they feel safe, you got it. My family tell me, "You're not God, you can't change them all." But I can make a difference. It's not about changing them.

Of course they are problem kids! The one thing I did is made their problem my problem. Who do we think we are to pin tags on these kids? We forget that they have a heart, they have feelings. I open my heart, I open my door, and I open my wallet. Unless we reach out, there are not going to be many kids for tomorrow.

If I was able, I would have this big house and just

go through the projects, go to the children that need somebody, and pick them up and go shopping for them for school clothes. I would gather them up and take them out to dinner. There are children who have never been out to dinner, have never been to a fair. There are children who don't have a tomorrow if we don't pick them up. Quit pushing them down, and pick them up.

In 35 years we never had a kid get shot up, no guns. I have never seen a stolen car parked in my driveway from none of them. But they had to grow to that. When they walk in, you can't just push them, you got to show some tears every now and then. You got to let them know, "I feel you." If we don't understand them, then they don't care. Teenage boys are just as easy as the babies, once they get your trust. You can't fool them, you just got to be real with them. You can't bake a pan of cornbread and say that this is a cake.

Many of my kids come now and say, "Oh, mama, how did I take you through that. You so super." I don't need a pat on the back. It might seem that it's putting wear on me, but it's not. My heart feel good, I feel good. When I go into the kitchen to cook, it's a good feeling to know that I have to cook more than one piece of chicken; it's a good feeling to feed all of the kids.

My whole life is different because I had these kids in my life. I'm not helpless anymore. I find something to heal my pain, what I had from a lil' girl. I find joy. I have loved them, I have learned them strength and I've grown from their strength. I'm not even tired, because I know I am a God-sent mom.



Of course they are problem kids!
The one thing I did is made their
problem my problem. Unless we
reach out, there are not going to
be many kids for tomorrow.



The Brain Is the Most Wonderful Organ

During summer vacation when I was in med school, some of the neighborhood children and teens wanted to ask me questions, clear their doubts, and get help with their homework. Because many of their essays were science or math, their parents would encourage them: “Oh, Ravi is back here from school, so why don’t you go ask him.” Back at home in Kerala, people will drop into your house and visit with you. When they ask you for your help, you don’t feel like saying no, especially when it is something close to your heart.

After I became a pediatrician, I used to sit down and chat with my patients and help them sort out their problems, especially with school. You see so many people wasting their potential, because they don’t have the proper guidance. If you have an interest in arts, or sports, you should develop that. But I always told youngsters, “Your priority should be developing your brain, which is the most wonderful organ.”

We have been involved with middle school and high school children of this area for many years, directing science fair projects. In fact, we were the Institutional Review Board for every medical project which students conducted during those years. And

both of us were judges for the Florida Junior Academy of Sciences. We were very much into science teaching and coaching.

I would tell my patients that they should enter with a science project. They would ask for ideas and I would mention something simple that they could start with. Then they would bring their projects and abstracts for correction. I used to guide them through that.

I am a scientist, and I tell students: If you become a good scientist, it doesn’t matter if it’s mathematics, computers, medicine, engineering. Whatever it is, there is going to be a job for you. We cannot live without science.

Whatever you learn in your childhood usually stays with you. Some children don’t mind being forced, but many children don’t like it. However, there is a fine line between guiding and forcing. If you have no interest, you will not succeed. It depends on your level of interest, and how much you can put into it. Basically that’s the equation.

Whatever you learned, you have to pass it on to the younger generation.



Some children don’t mind being forced, but many children don’t like it. However, there is a fine line between guiding and forcing.

* Dr. Susheela Nathan’s words appear in italics, Dr. Ravindra Nathan’s words in roman type.



Saying Nothing

In high school, I was a typical, bashful, quiet sophomore. I loved the school I was at. It was the first time ever I met Christian Brothers. I was terrified of them, because they were so strict. I met this brother who used to play the piano. Five or six of us used to gather around the piano and we would play what you would call today rock and roll. I was surprised he knew all these things. I thought brothers went to this place to pray all by themselves, and the world was left behind.

That brother says, “Did you ever think of becoming a Christian Brother?” I was so embarrassed I couldn’t say anything.

A month goes by. He says, “Martin McCullagh, what did you come to?” I said, “They would never take me. They’ll hate me. I think I’m not good enough to be a brother.” He says, “You don’t have to be good enough. You want to be good enough, that’s why you join.”

I was a full time teacher for 52 years. I started in grammar school and high school. Then I worked at a college in admissions. I used to go around and get young girls and young guys to go to college there. I loved it. You meet the nicest people in the world.

Now that I’m retired, I have to do something. I’m in charge of all the copying at the high school. It occupies me for several hours a day. I call it the cave, where I work—no windows.

I love talking to the guys, and they like talking to me. I have set things that I say: “How about that

smile?” Or a guy goes by, and I say, “Smile, because you only have one more class to go.” Simple things like this. I used to put that down, as something not consequential or important.

One day, I was like, “You can smile now. You got a free day. You got a long weekend.” And the boy looked at me and he started to cry. Uh-oh, I said the wrong thing. I didn’t know. He told me everything. He was fighting at home with his parents. And they pretty well told him, “You’re a good-for-nothing. I’m sorry we ever brought you into this world.” That’s like being cut in two by family. His marks went down awfully fast. He felt useless. I don’t know if what I said meant anything. Later, I realized he doesn’t want me to say anything. He just wants me to listen.

When I started, I had to be the speaker. I had to tell the guy what to do. He would be there listening, and I would do all the talking. It should have been reversed. Saying nothing is the best sign of mentoring. After all my mistakes, I just listened.

You can pass on only those things you experience yourself. It’s like they say in writing. “Don’t write anything unless you know it.” How to handle the highs and lows in life, that’s the hard part. A mature person comes to understand that it’s not going to be easy. Students pale when I tell them: “No, you never failed. Just try again.”



I don’t know if what I said meant anything. Later, I realized he doesn’t want me to say anything. He just wants me to listen.