

60 in 60 Initiative

By Dr. Janet Koroscik

According to the 2012 Wisconsin County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 31% of the children in Kenosha County are living in single-parent households. Further research indicates that children living in single-parent households have a greater likelihood of becoming troubled youths. Typically, the parent in these single-parent households is working more than one job so their children spend a lot of time alone after school and in the summer months. With so many children needing support from adults, it is important for community members to step up and volunteer to spend time with the youth in Kenosha. Organizations such as Mentor Kenosha & Racine at UW-Parkside, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Racine & Kenosha County, Kenosha Area Business Alliance (KABA), Big Sisters of Kenosha, and the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) through Kenosha Area Family and Aging Services, Inc. (KAFASI) have taken the lead in addressing this issue.

Every year these organizations provide volunteers for at-risk students and this year, have matched over 300 students with an adult mentor. Paris Echoles, Kenosha Unified School District's (KUSD) Coordinator of Student Engagement and Equity reports there may be as many as 100 students who are still waiting for the services of a volunteer mentor. That number may not appear significant at first glance, but ask a child in need of a mentor if this is an important issue and a different answer will surface.

In an effort to respond to this need, the RSVP Mentor Program has launched a **60 in 60 Initiative** to recruit 60 new mentors in 60 days. Even though the RSVP program utilizes adults 55 and over, they have pledged to work in collaboration with the other area mentor programs. Everyone who volunteers as part of this initiative will be slotted into the specific mentor program that best suits their time and abilities.

It only takes 30-60 minutes per week to make a difference in the life of a child by serving as a mentor. What is a mentor? A mentor is a caring and supportive adult, a role model, an advocate, a confidant, a confidence builder, and a friend. Research based on effective mentors concluded the most important characteristic of a successful mentor is a commitment to provide personal time and attention to the child.

The RSVP Mentor Program is a school-based volunteer service that matches mentors and students (mentees). Mentors meet with their mentee for 30-45 minutes once a week, at a mutually convenient time during regular school hours and in the school of their choice. All mentors receive a Mentor Handbook, a Mentor Starter Kit, and orientation to the program. Additional support is provided through monthly Mentor Support meetings.

If you are in doubt as to whether mentors make a difference, the RSVP mentors are more than willing to share their thoughts regarding this volunteer service. Howard Goodman lives in Kenosha and has been mentoring for eight years while continuing to work full time in Illinois. He has worked with children across grade levels, first grade through high school. His most

memorable experience as a mentor was the moment when he finally earned the trust of his mentee and the bond was officially established. When asked what advice he had for mentors who are just starting out, he replied, “Be patient, be flexible, and most important – be a good listener.”

For Susan Radke, a retired RN with six children of her own and numerous grandchildren, mentoring was a natural step when she retired. She was looking for something to do to occupy her time and noticed a “blurb” in the Local News Briefs asking for volunteers. That was six years ago. She began with a little girl in Kindergarten and stayed with her all through elementary school. When her mentee moved on to middle school this year, Radke chose to stay in the elementary school setting and was matched with her mentee’s younger sister. She encourages others to become a mentor, “It’s so easy – you just have to love a child.”

Dr. Michael Thompson, a retired Kenosha podiatrist also started mentoring shortly after retiring. While serving ‘on and off’ the KAFASI Board of Directors for nine years, he found that the organizations were “desperate to find mentors – the need was so obvious.” He has had several memorable moments as a mentor, but said it was “most rewarding when you know that the child has benefitted.”

Even though mentors are asked to commit for one school year when volunteering for the RSVP Mentor Program, most mentors choose to continue on. Ellen Przybylski began nine years ago after she retired. She has been married 51 years and has three children and five grandchildren. Mentoring a child was an obvious choice for her after years of working with children in scouts, catechism, and as a mother. She has had her share of hugs along the way but was most affected by a mentee who transferred to another KUSD elementary school and asked her to change schools with him.

By and large, most mentors begin volunteering as a way to give back to the community and to help a child in need. What surprised them all was how much they received back through this service. If you can spare less than an hour per week to make a difference in the life of a child, please consider becoming a mentor. To volunteer or obtain more information, contact RSVP Mentor Liaison, Dr. Janet Koroscik at mentors.rsvp@gmail.com or call Darleen Coleman, RSVP Program Director at 262-658-3508 ext 115.

Who knows? If RSVP can achieve their goal of recruiting 60 mentors in 60 days, then maybe they will keep the initiative going and recruit 100 mentors in 100 days to completely fill the needs of all the students who are waiting for a mentor.