



Becoming a mentor can give a young person a better future

Written by

Wendy Gardner

6:10 PM, Apr. 19, 2011|

On March 6, the Byram Hills School District held its Winter Athletic Banquet in the Grand Ballroom of the Westchester Marriott. On March 31, six miles away, Children's Village hosted its basketball dinner in the hallway of its Lanza Activities Center.

Both events included awards for most valuable player and scholar athlete. But Children's Village conferred an award not given at Byram Hills, a plaque honoring a parent for consistent attendance at his son's games. He was the only parent so honored. In fact, he was the only parent to attend the games — or the basketball dinner. This is a tale of two counties, both within Westchester — one with parents, one without.

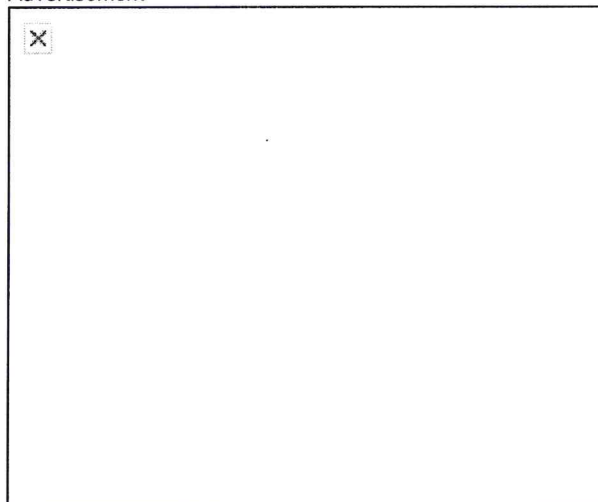
Right now there is much criticism of our education system and wide difference of opinion on how to address the issues confronting our public schools. Educators and legislators argue the pros and cons of testing, tenure, merit pay, charter schools and class size. Nothing is clear except that

answers aren't easy. The debate rages.

But all agree that parental involvement in our children's lives is essential to their academic success. We talk so much about eating dinner with our children as a paragon of good parenting that it's become cliché, but in Westchester backyards, at Children's Village, the Cottage School, Lincoln Hall, children do not have parents waiting at home with warm meals and conversations about the day. They don't have parents to advocate at school board meetings, help with homework and vote for budgets that fund athletics, theater programs, computers or even new library books.

Visitors to the Children's Village gym will find the home section of the bleachers by looking to the empty rows. A few staff members give up their evenings to root for the CV basketball teams, while the parents of opponents cheer en masse. Who's taking photos, saying "good game," giving a hug after a disappointing loss, sharing an ice cream? No one. As big as the hearts are of

Advertisement



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™



the underpaid and overworked staff at Children's Village, it's impossible for one heart to expand enough to meet the needs of a school full of abused, abandoned, and aching young men.

At the CV dinner, we applaud each player. Then the coach takes the mike and says, "In other schools, they have what's called boosters. We have them too. Let's clap it up for our boosters." My husband and I are the boosters. We're there to support a student we mentor. The Byram Hills Booster's Club sponsors clothing sales, tournaments, Homecoming Weekend and thrice-yearly sports banquets; it has donated to the district concession stand equipment, a gym sound system and scholarships. Hundreds of Byram Hills parents attend games and awards events. We two are their counterparts at Children's Village.

Brooke Geni, a young CV social worker, understands the problems inherent in returning the students to dysfunctional homes. So after four years of counseling children, she's leaving CV to work with parents. When I first hear this, I admire her instincts, yet I fill with despair at the magnitude of her Sisyphean task. But while our legislators are experimenting with "No Child Left Behind" and "Race to the Top," with school budget cuts in Albany, and tenure revision, the Brooke Genis of the world chip away, one child, one family at a time. Brooke won't fix our broken system. Tutors and mentors can't replace parents. But they can provide encouragement, consistency, advocacy, and the occasional

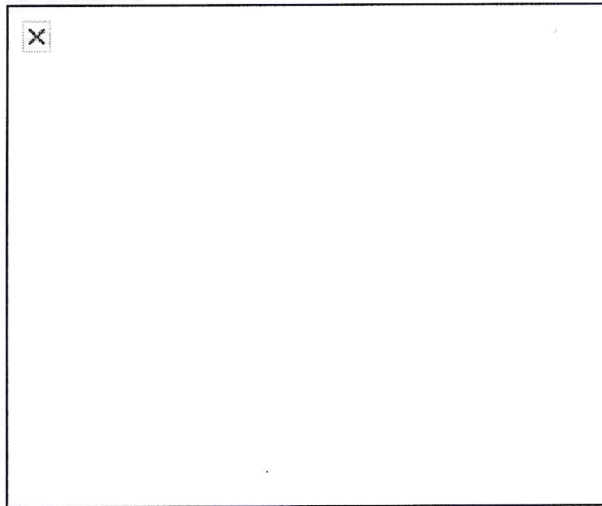
hug.

At the Byram Hills sports banquet, a professionally edited video, set to music, reprises the season. The athletes elbow each other and laugh as familiar faces fill the screen.

At the Children's Village dinner, a projector scrolls through still photos of the students. The athletes elbow each other and laugh as familiar faces fill the screen. Whatever their walk in life, boys will be boys.

Our collective well-being depends upon addressing the needs of those most at risk. Individually none of us can save the world, but each of us can chip away. Parenting is tough. Nourishing our children, physically, intellectually, emotionally, leaves us tired at the end of the day. So it's tempting to count our blessings and turn a blind eye to the unmet needs of other people's children. But there's a cost to all of us for every child who fails to become a healthy contributing member of society, and human decency demands that we not turn our backs.

Advertisement



Print Powered By FormatDynamics



So please: become a mentor, a tutor or a coach, sponsor a trip to a museum or a zoo, spend an afternoon bringing a human touch to a young student — a student who attends a school where parental involvement is so absent that simply going to a ball game earns an award.

Advertisement



Print Powered By FormatDynamics