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TIM LAMORTE/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Lauren Blum and Brandon, a 17-year-old she mentors at The Children's Village.

CV honors volunteer for championing teens

By Jackie Lupo

DOBBS FERRY — In her professional life as a nurse practitioner and child advocate, Lauren Blum of Hastings has worked with vulnerable young patients, including teenagers suspected to be victims of abuse and neglect.

Twelve years ago, while working part-time and while her own children were in school, she wondered how she could do more for at-risk teens. So when her friend Pam Allyn, a former Hastings resident and volunteer at The Children's Village in Dobbs Ferry, told her about a new literacy program being established there, Blum jumped at the chance to be involved.

"I had time and I wanted to do that, because I could," she said. "I felt time could make some difference with each kid."

Today, reading is part of the culture of CV thanks to volunteers like Blum. For her work in CV's literacy initiatives, Blum received the "Legacy of Service" award at CV's annual gala at Chelsea Piers in Manhattan on April 28.

"I think it's a really easy thing to do if you can commit the time," Blum said. "Just being there and showing up — that means so much to a lot of these kids who haven't had that before... I take it very seriously."

"Lauren has an innate ability to connect with the kids," said Amy DelliPaoli, CV's director of volunteers. "She just seems to know what they want, what they need. And they love her for it. Children's Village is grateful to have her as part of our team."

Blum emerged as an avid reader during adulthood. She was intrigued by the idea that "you could instill a love of reading in any kid." In her earliest volunteer role at CV, she was a cottage librarian in the Books for Boys program.

"We brought books into each cottage," she said. "We found out what kind of books the types of boys at CV liked to read, and we started acquiring those types of books."

Blum said many of the teens were re-

luctant readers, or "kids who hadn't been exposed to reading in their family culture, or had been turned off to reading." But, she said, by finding out their interests and providing books that were at their reading level, "Kids will love to read."

After the Books for Boys program became popular at CV, it became "cool" to carry books around, but some teens lacked the skills to really read them. Nine years ago, Blum and her husband, Paul, a fashion industry executive, helped establish "FLY," the Foundation for Literate Youth, which provides one-on-one tutoring during lunchtime to students who want to read, but still struggle. The remedial reading program is now funded by Lit World, a global literacy nonprofit where Blum is a board member and Allyn is executive director. FLY has a core group of volunteers who have tutored at CV since the program began, including Nancy Kliot, Joanne Levine and Susan Meigs of Hastings, Carol Intner of Dobbs Ferry, and Nicole Clark of Pleasantville.

Meanwhile, the Books for Boys program has also evolved. Now that there are also girls on the CV campus, there is one central library and the program's name has been changed to the "Open Door Library."

Blum said some volunteers feel more comfortable working with younger kids, but she has an affinity for teenagers. "I think some kids get the short end of the stick by bad luck," she said. "They've been born into families where they don't get what they need."

Some teens who live at CV have troubled pasts or behavioral issues. The teachers who work with these students know their backgrounds and try to help them develop appropriate social skills.

"The difference between a volunteer and people who work at CV," Blum said, "is that the staffers know all the kids' backgrounds. With the volunteers they don't know their past or their history, so the students can start with a clean slate."

Blum said when the teens work with the volunteers, "It's amazing how polite they are, because they are showing you who they want you to see, and to be the receiver of the person they are trying to put forward."

With the CV cottage libraries centralized, Blum now mentors a 17-year-old boy named Brandon.

"If you look at my mentee... he's had such a tough time and you've never met a more upbeat and positive kid," Blum said. "He always looks on the bright side. You wouldn't believe it after what he's been through. I get much more than I give with this stuff."

In addition to her volunteer work at CV, Blum has two paid positions: one at the Montefiore Child Advocacy Center in the Bronx, part of the Children's Hospital at Montefiore, and one at Central Avenue Pediatrics' Bronx office. She also visits Haiti once a year to perform medical humanitarian work with the organization Hands Up for Haiti.

Blum's whole family has developed a culture of volunteering. Daughters Liana, 26, and Eliza, 22, both of whom graduated from Hastings High School, volunteered at CV as teens. Her son Nathan, who will graduate from HHS this spring, volunteers with AFYA, a nonprofit that delivers medical supplies to underserved locations around the world.

"There's so much synergy with volunteering in the Rivertowns," Blum said. "AFYA actually ships the supplies for Hands Up for Haiti, and had CV boys volunteering there also. So with all these organizations there's kind of a connection."

What keeps her going?

"It's not hard for me," Blum said. "I work with abused kids and kids who have been through tough things at CV. People say, 'That's so hard, so sad, how do you do that?' But I find it incredibly inspiring. Kids can be so resilient, what they can endure. It's an incredible inspiration for my own life. It gives me a lot of hope."