

## Mentors open paths for youth at Children's Village

By Kris DiLorenzo

DOBBS FERRY — The Connections program at Children's Village (CV) is in the matchmaking business. Instead of connecting couples, however, it is pairing up selected CV residents with mentors.

Connections was founded last April by Paul Muratore, an Irvington-based consultant with a 30-year background in advertising, media, and entertainment who has been mentoring for about the same amount of time. He has been a volunteer at CV since 1985.

The program is open to boys age 15 to 25, helping them learn skills that will serve them when they leave CV and embark on independent living. Presently, 15 mentees are working with mentors who guide them through options for higher education, vocational training, employment, and housing — and engage them in mutually appealing activities.

Muratore described what a mentor does. "Walk alongside them along whatever path they go down. They begin to open up; you help them discover who they are. They discover there's a world out there that they can participate in fully."

Jordan, a 17-year-old from the Bronx, has been at CV for almost two years. He recently took two Regents exams required to earn his high school diploma, and is looking forward to training for an internship this summer, with further plans to attend community college before transferring to a four-year institution. He's attracted to science, especially forensics; he's experimenting with being a DJ; and he's enthused about training dogs as part of the new Canine Rescue & Rehab (K9 R&R) program at CV.

Because of his interest in sports — Jordan played on the CV baseball team last year and now focuses on basketball — he was matched with sports fan Steve Schneider, a 53-year-old financial advisor at Wells Fargo Advisors in Danbury, Conn., who has lived in Irvington for seven years. The two take occasional excursions for a bite to eat, have gone bowling and to the batting cages, recently took in the movie "Hidden Figures," and, of course, play basketball.

"We have many common interests: sports, current events, animals — dogs in particular," Schneider said. "So it's easy for us to sit down and talk over a slice of pizza."

Schneider, who has a son and two stepchildren, found out about Connections when he read an interview with Muratore in the Rivertowns Enterprise last summer. Schneider contacted him, and was teamed up with Jordan this past October.

"I wanted to be a mentor because the possibility resonated with me," Schneider explained. "When I was a teenager, I was helped by adults, including teachers and coaches who took an interest in me and made an impression on me. I see this as an opportunity to pay it forward." Schneider first was a mentor during his four years at the University of Notre Dame, where he was a "Big Brother."

As a high school freshman in the Bronx, Jordan had a "Big Sister" he credits with helping him navigate his ups and downs that year. That experience primed him for accepting a mentor when Muratore offered him one at CV.

"I asked him, 'What's a mentor?'" Jordan recalled. "He said, 'Someone who's always going to check up on you, someone to always be there for you, and have some free time with you; whenever you want to speak, you can call them.' So I said, 'Sure, let's try



TIM LAMORTE/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Jordan and Steve Schneider eat lunch at Doubleday's in Dobbs Ferry on Jan. 28.



TIM LAMORTE/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Jordan and Schneider talk with co-owner Stephen Lester Jr. at New York Hard Core Comics in Dobbs Ferry on Jan. 28.

this.' I was so happy, because that person could keep me in a safe place, and will always check up on me and always know that I'm safe," he explained.

Schneider has been impressed with his mentee.

"He talks about family members and friends back home, so I know he's a caring young man," Schneider said. "I love his positive attitude; he always has a smile on his face. Every time we're together he's upbeat. I find him to be very intelligent and interested in what's going on in the world; he keeps up-to-date on current events. He's very informed; he's aware of the world outside of video games."

According to Jordan, Schneider is always on top of him about college applications. "He's like, 'Look, you can succeed. You look like you have something going for yourself. I want you to go somewhere.'" They both hope to keep in touch after Jordan moves onto employment and college.

The Connections program has attracted a variety of sponsors, donors, and mentors-in-training, including sponsor Bill Belchou, owner of DoctorMac in Irvington, an authorized Apple computer reseller and service provider. Belchou has provided mentees with laptops for educational purposes. Jordan has been using his to create deejay mix tapes as he considers the idea of a music industry career.

Belchou hosted a National Mentor Month event on Jan. 19 at his store, at 64 Main Street, where 25 sponsors, donors, mentors, and potential mentors met to share information and form relationships. Muratore is aiming to recruit five more mentors. His success so far has enabled him to hire the first full-time Connections employee, program manager Jahmeal Blain.

Mentorship is having an impact on Jordan. While he's "still figuring out a lot of things; figuring out what I want to be," he's certain about what he's learned. "I feel more strength in myself, more confidence to be able to accomplish something, because I know he's always going to have my back and not lead me astray," he said about Schneider. "I'm surrounding myself with the people that I feel are always going to be there with me, and are always going to help me through thick and thin."

About Connections, he said, "I think it's going to help a lot of children under my age range, 13 to 17, to understand that someone is always going to be there for you, not just your parents and not just the people that are around you."

His message to other kids who might have come from difficult backgrounds is, "Don't give up. Don't ever give up. There's always going to be someone who's going to pop up, like a Whack-a-mole: you just got to hit it and take the opportunity."