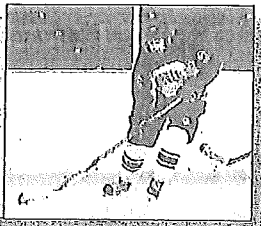


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Norwalk Citizen

www.norwalkcitizenonline.com

Norwalk program celebrates National Mentoring Month

268 students still need mentors

By David Hennessey
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Both veteran mentors and newcomers to the Norwalk Mentor Program had the opportunity last Thursday evening to query the woman who started it all—Susan Weinberger.

She founded Norwalk's mentoring program in 1986, and it was the first school-based model in the nation.

The Human Services Council (HSC) held the event in conjunction with National Mentoring Month, which President Barack Obama proclaimed on Jan. 4.

During the meeting at the HSC's office on Park Avenue, Weinberger dished out some of her best practices to about 30 eager mentors, each of whom

had come to learn how to become the best mentor possible.

Weinberger's advice ranged from the practical, "You do not want to allow your mentee to win all the time. Competition is part of life," to the encouraging, "Remember the value of play and remember the message you are sending: that you are consistently there for him or her."

Included in Weinberger's humorous and informative session were suggestions for mentor-mentee activities; she mentioned arts and crafts and chess as two worthwhile endeavors. She also doled out valuable advice to those mentors knee-deep in the treacherous waters of the middle school to high school transition.

"This [a child's changing behavior] is not your

See Mentors on A12

A mentee shares his story

By David Hennessey
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Brien McMahon 10th grader and three-sport athlete Michael Keels is a walking testament to the power of Norwalk's mentor program.

Keels, now 16, sat down with the Citizen on Monday to explain how six years with mentor Alan Winnick has changed his life for the better.

"At first I was a little shaky about having a mentor," Keels said. "I already had friends at that point. And I wasn't sure why I needed a mentor."

See Mentee on A12

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Weather

MOSTLY SUNNY

Today expect highs in the lower 40s. Sat. will bring highs in the lower 40s. Sun. will be mostly cloudy. Highs in the upper 30s.



Mentors

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There is nothing more important, Weinberger said, than the simple conversation with a mentee that asks how he or she is doing and, above all else, poses the question: What can I do to help?

According to Weinberger, mentors should avoid regularly presenting gifts to mentees and judging the lives of their mentees.

She also urged mentors to keep a sense of humor, teach proper etiquette and the value of saving money and show up on time for meetings with mentees, who so often look forward to just an hour with a positive role model who truly cares.

Weinberger began mentoring Norwalk resident Tasha Brande at the age of seven.

Brande, now a FedEx employee and Norwalk Community College student, spoke Thursday evening on behalf of the mentoring program.

"I am the product of having a mentor," she said.

She told mentors their presence is a huge comfort to mentees.

"I knew I was going to see her [Weinberger]," she said. "The fact that she was a constant was a big deal to me."

"The things that you tell them, even at the beginning... they're listening," Brande added. "Little things that you say along the way are confidence boosters. You are connecting."

Jackie L. Effen, coordinator for the Norwalk Mentor Program, said there are 268 students in the city who need to be matched with mentors.

Effen added that while the program needs both male and female mentors, male mentors are often more hard to come by.

"Studies show that men are much less likely to mentor," she said. "A lot of the students don't have positive male role models in their lives."

Effen urged those interested in the program to contact her at the Human Services Council for an application. Mentors partake in a background check and a two-and-a-half hour training session. An accepted mentor will then choose a school, and a mentor liaison at that school will match the mentor with a mentee.

"They're good kids," Effen said. "But they need someone in their corner cheering them on."

For information about becoming a mentor, call Effen at (203) 849.1111

Mentee

Continued from A1

Chief among Keels' apprehensions was anxiety over how two people separated in age by decades could possibly have anything in common.

That worry, Keels said, quickly disintegrated.

Keels said he and Winnick were first paired during his transition from Brookside Elementary to Roton Middle School - a difficult period in Keels' life, he remembered, as he repeated the fifth grade and watched as childhood friends passed on to middle school.

"I was getting in fights and was getting detentions," he recalled. "But [he] Winnick told me in a simple voice how I needed to calm it down....I'm so much calmer now than I was then."

Winnick has stuck with Keels since that rough patch more than half a decade ago. Now, they discuss life, current events and sports - Winnick wrestled and played football competitively and Keels plays football and lacrosse and runs track.

"He really listens when I talk. And now I talk to him like he's one of my best friends,"

Keels said.

After thinking about it for a moment, he added: "He is one of my best friends."

All preconceived concerns of a mentor not being able to relate to a mentee have long since evaporated, according to Keels.

Now it's just him and his good friend - a man who has been there, week-in, week-out, since his 10th birthday.

"It gives me an extra person, a friend, a role model to talk to. If I have a problem, I can talk to him about it," Keels said. "And he emphasizes the importance of education."

That's why he has his sights set on college and even medical school. And the motivation, drive and positive attitude needed to reach those goals have flourished in Keels at least in part because of his relationship with Winnick - the type of relationship the Norwalk Mentor Program strives to foster.

"You might be nervous at first," Keels said. "But give your mentor time to grow on you....And trust me, he will grow on you."