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Mentoring program helps Placer's at-risk youth

Program aims to keep kids from entering the juvenile justice, child welfare systems

By Sena Christian, The Press Tribune



Photo by Anne Stokes

Roseville resident Jerry Foster has mentored Cirby Elementary School fifth grader Juan Martinez for the past year through the Child Advocates of Placer County Adult to Youth Mentoring Program.



dropped out of high school in Placer County in 2008 and more than 4,000 who were arrested, according to the most recent data available to the Child Advocates of Placer County.

The nonprofit organization relies on volunteers to help address these statistics - but finding men to volunteer is always a struggle. Foster started mentoring a year ago and works with three kids.

"I've always had a soft spot for children who need attention and don't get it," Foster said.

To become a mentor, Foster underwent 30 hours of training - the same training as Court Appointed Special Advocates, who work one-on-one with a foster child advocating on his or her behalf in juvenile court. About 370 kids go through Placer County Juvenile Dependency Court each year.

Foster spends about three hours a week with Juan, working on homework and hanging out together. During warm months, they enjoy going to Golfland Sunsplash. He also works with Juan's teachers to identify issues and challenges to address. Juan's resource teacher Kristina Kress says the change in her student has been remarkable.

Last year, Juan Martinez spent a lot of time in the principal's office.

He made some bad choices as a student at Cirby Elementary School in Roseville. But just one year later, that's all turned around.

"Now, I see him on the playground and it's always a thumbs up," said Principal Karen Quinlan. "He walks around knowing he's making better choices and doing the right thing, so he's standing taller."

Juan, 11, is now a fifth grader earning mostly A's and behaving better. He, his principal and his teacher all credit a special person in Juan's life with helping set him on the right course: his mentor.

Jerry Foster has mentored Juan for the past year through Child Advocates of Placer County's Adult to Youth Mentoring Program. A mentor works with at-risk youth to help prevent a child from entering the juvenile justice or child welfare systems.

These youth may live with family or be in out-of-home placements. Either way, the goal is to make a positive difference in their lives. There were about 196 youth who

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"His level of appropriateness with adults has grown and he's taken more pride in himself as a student," Kress said.

Juan asks questions during class. Before he'd shut down if he didn't understand something, but now he seldom does that, Kress said. He knows there's always someone there to support him.

"We asked him about his favorite thing to do and he said, 'Spending time with Jerry,'" Kress said.

Juan says his mentor has made him a better student.

"I used to get in trouble a lot, and now I don't because he's helped me," Juan said.

Foster doesn't have kids of his own, so mentoring has been a learning experience for him, too.

"(Juan) has been very cooperative and he's a fine young man," Foster said. "I want to thank Juan for working so hard to turn (himself) around. Mentoring is a great thrill. I get a lot of satisfaction from it."

He said there's no timeframe for mentoring even though volunteers are only asked for a year commitment.

"His mother asked me to stay around," Foster said. "And I'm perfectly happy to do so."

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Child Advocates of Placer County

To become a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) or mentor in the Adult to Youth Mentoring Program:

- Attend one mandatory orientation session
- Complete 30-35 hours of training
- Pass background check
- Be at least 21 years of age, have a good driving record and reliable transportation
- Serve a minimum of one year and four to 12 hours per month
- Complete 12 hours of continuing education over course of a year
- For more information, call (530) 887-1006 or visit www.casaplacer.org

Keywords

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