

MENTORS: Preparing students for post-high school choices

Continued from page 3

whom they meet individually. Sisters resident and mother of two sons, Lori Larson has served as an ASPIRE mentor for close to 45 students over the past nine years.

"I've had students say that my guiding, prodding and advocating for them was instrumental in their admissions and scholarship opportunities," she shared.

Larson grew up in a small tourist town in the north woods of Wisconsin similar to Sisters, a fact that helped her empathize with the need for students to have one-on-one guidance to plan beyond high school. She didn't have that opportunity at her high school, so she is happy to now help students discover opportunities they didn't know existed before. She thinks it is important to give students the responsibility to plan their future while getting guidance from an adult who is not their parent.

"Mentors may be saying the same things as parents, but somehow students listen better to a mentor. And, parents appreciate our involvement," Larson said.

SHS student Jonathan "JW" Bertagna, one of Larson's mentees, thinks it is important for teens to have mentors.

"It is very important. They have lots of knowledge to share and can hold you accountable," Bertagna said.

To adults considering being a mentor, Bertagna offers this advice: "If you want to make a good difference in a student's life, you

should do this."

Larson typically meets with her mentees about every four to six weeks, although she will meet as often as necessary, which may mean weekly during some phases. The role of a mentor can vary with each student. Some students need minimal support while others are guided every step of the way. It varies with the needs and interests of the student, and sometimes the parents.

"If students are engaged and putting in the effort, I am more than willing to offer as much time as needed for a student to achieve his or her goals."

Students who engage and put the effort into exploring and planning their future have a rewarding experience, learning skills such as creating a résumé, acquiring letters of recommendation and interviewing skills.

Larson pointed out there isn't a one-size-fits-all formula for mentoring students

with their education after high school. Mentors from different backgrounds enrich the experience for students and the ASPIRE volunteer community. Helping students take one step at a time and prioritize is key. To utilize a mentor, students don't have to be planning on college. They can receive guidance regarding vocational training, specialized programs, employment, and the military.

Another ASPIRE mentor, Kerani Mitchell, who is a program manager for Sisters Folk Festival, is a first-year mentor who is a graduate of SHS where she was involved in many activities. She thinks her background helps her to understand the pressure that some of the students are under in respect to achieving success.

She is working with both juniors and seniors and finds that the seniors are very independent. As a new mentor she said there is some outside

learning to understand the requirements for each grade and estimates she spends one to two hours a week per mentee.

Mitchell shares an interest in music with one of her mentees, Brandon Ermatinger, who said, "I feel it is important to have a mentor. They are able to help you figure out what you want for your future and the direction you want to go." He added, "Get a mentor especially if you don't have an exact idea of what you want to do in the future. A mentor can help you figure that out."

Both Mitchell and Larson meet with their mentees at the high school. Larson does sometimes meet outside school hours, with the parents' knowledge, to assist with application deadlines, or to prepare for an interview. To stay in touch and check-in on deadlines, she also texts with her mentees.

"We meet and talk about dreams, interests, and goals

beyond high school; use computers/Internet to show students how to conduct research and explore schools, and help complete online applications. We establish a framework and schedule to meet deadlines. I advise and provide guidance; connect them with additional expert resources, such as test prep, and financial-aid resources," said Larson.

As seniors prepare to graduate, Larson likes to give her mentees a book or handouts on tips for surviving college. She offers tips to help smooth the transition from high school to college.

"It does 'take a village' to guide Sisters students in being successful beyond high school. The ASPIRE mentors are a key component of the village in Sisters," concluded Larson.

To volunteer or for more information, contact Rick Kroytz, ASPIRE coordinator, 541-241-4841 or rick.kroytz@sisters.k12.or.us.

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