

Circle of Friends mentors unlock stories

By Sue Stafford
Correspondent

"I believe all children have stories to tell and all children need an adult to listen," said Circle of Friends mentor and board member, Jan Martin.

If you would like to be one of those listeners, Circle of Friends will be conducting mentor training on Saturday, January 28. To become a mentor one must apply, have an interview, and agree to an extensive background check, including fingerprinting, driving record, social media, and personal references.

Kelly Davis Martin, M.P.H. and program director for Circle of Friends, points to Stanford University research, which indicates that consistency of mentoring over a long period of time is of great benefit to a child. Davis Martin used the metaphor of putting one marble at a time into a jar. It may take a long time, but the end result is a full jar.

Sisters resident Duncan Campbell started a similar program in Portland called Friends of the Children, which utilized paid mentors. That program, which now has nine sites, was adapted for Sisters, using all-volunteer mentors. One Sisters child told her mentor, "I would never want a paid mentor. I know my mentor wants to be with me."

The goal is to match a child with a mentor when they are in kindergarten or first grade and continue a mentoring relationship through high school. The mentor may not be the same person for all 12 years. A student may have three or four mentors during their school career in Sisters, but the consistency of participating in the mentoring program has been shown to provide cost savings to the public with a reduction in teen pregnancy and less involvement with the juvenile justice system by

children who have mentors.

Mentors can be an entire family, couples, individuals, or several people co-mentoring one child. The arrangement all depends on the needs of the individual child and the availability of time by the mentor. Children are referred mainly by teachers and school counselors, but some parents contact COF directly to enroll their child in the mentoring program.

There are many different reasons for a child to participate including socioeconomic factors, the family structure, having no extended family in the area, any number of reasons for needing extra support, and sometimes behavioral or academic challenges. There are currently 32 mentors matched with 27 children. The waiting list is always long and the need for new mentors great. They are hoping to match five to 10 new mentors with children after the next training.

Circle of Friends organizes many programs for mentors and their children – making birdhouses, cooking classes, outdoor activities, marching in the holiday parade, a trip to Harmony Farm Sanctuary, and art experiences with Annie Painter in her Sisters studio. They also provide experiences that not all children are able to do, such as swim and martial arts classes, for which they pay the fees. At Christmastime, each child receives a \$20 gift certificate to the Habitat for Humanity thrift store to do Christmas shopping. The children love having the opportunity to give something to others.

Mentors receive ongoing support at their once-a-month meeting where they can "talk shop," build resiliency, and nurture that mentoring spark.

Twice a year there is an appreciation dinner for all the volunteers. The children go to Annie Painter's studio to make appreciation gifts and gratitude cards for their mentors to receive at the dinners.

Jan Martin, who is a retired educator, wanted to find a volunteer role that would be a good fit for her time, energy, passion and experience.

"I wanted volunteer work focused on relationships – something I had spent my professional life pursuing and nurturing," she said.

"I was matched with a spunky, hilarious, affectionate, brilliant, beautiful five-year-old kindergarten girl in November of 2015 and we immediately became fast friends," Martin recalled.

After 13 wonderful months as her mentor, Martin had to say goodbye to her little friend when her family left the area in December. Martin doesn't know for sure what impact that year of mentoring had but her now six-year-old asked to do Facetime so she could actually see her.

"I know I miss her presence in my life... I will continue to communicate and hope," Martin admitted.

It's fairly obvious that Martin did in fact have a very positive impact.

"She once said the most precious thing to me," recounted Martin. "'When I grow up, I want to be a mentor, and when I die I will think of you.'"

Kay Johnson has been a mentor with COF for four years. Prior to moving to Sisters, she mentored Wilsonville high school students with their academics as well as mentoring in the middle school.



PHOTO PROVIDED

Kay Johnson and Alexis – a pair of friends.

Johnson particularly enjoys starting the mentoring process with younger children in a program that encompasses more than just school.

Of her mentee, Johnson said, "She knows she has my support and encouragement and friendship. We get to do things together that show how important she is and her potential and confidence continues to increase."

Johnson has volunteered for many Sisters organizations like the ASPIRE program and Sisters Schools Foundation, but she has strong positive feelings about being a mentor for COF.

"I absolutely love this program and my friend!" she exclaimed. "It's fun getting to know the family and understanding how we can all

work together to help make our children more successful in life."

The activities that mentors and mentees can participate in run the gamut, from just spending time together playing or talking or cooking, to outings to the High Desert Museum, horseback riding, ice skating, the fish hatchery, riding bikes, and the science fair.

Martin sums up the mentoring experience beautifully.

"I've been reminded how much children need to have someone see the very best in them, listen to their stories, cares and concerns, and look at them with unconditional love in your eyes."

For more information, contact Kelly Davis Martin at 541-588-6445 or Kelly@acircleoffriendsoregon.com.

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