



U.S. Department of Education ■ Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools

Mentoring Resource Center



CASE STUDIES IN YOUTH MENTORING

Play Well With Others: Leveraging Local Partnerships for Program Success

Sonoma Valley Mentoring Alliance

May 2009

Introduction

When the program now known as the Stand By Me mentoring program got its start in 1996, it was through a modest state grant that didn't provide for any "bricks and mortar" expenditures. As a result, mentors met with youth outside, rain or shine, and program director Kathy Witkowicki worked out of her car. As the program grew from serving 35 students that first year to more than 100 in the third and final year of the grant, Witkowicki became more and more determined that the success of the program not be determined exclusively by the availability or lack of grant funding.

Witkowicki decided to form a nonprofit and turned to her community for support. The community rose to the occasion and the Sonoma Valley Mentoring Alliance was born. Fast forward to 2009, and Stand By Me, now in its 13th year of operation, serves more than 400 youth each year. Integral to this success have been the many local partnerships leveraged over the years. These partnerships take a variety of forms, including cash donations, services, volunteer help, and more, but they are all based on long-standing, carefully cultivated relationships. As Witkowicki reflects, "The personal relationship is at the heart of everything, whether it's mentoring, a partnership, or a business relationship."

Program Description

While Sonoma benefits from tourism, many families struggle. Twenty-five percent of Sonoma Valley's students have limited English proficiency and 54 percent qualify for the free or reduced-price school lunch program. While the median annual income in Sonoma is \$50,000, at least 15 percent of people live at or below the poverty level, with a total household income of less than \$15,000 per year.

The mission of the Sonoma Valley “Stand By Me” Mentoring Alliance is to invest in the future of the community by creating and supervising one-on-one long-term relationships between caring adults and at-risk schoolchildren in need of academic and social support. Together, they build a trusting friendship based on mutual respect in a safe and supportive environment.

Students are referred to the program by school administrators, teachers, counselors, law enforcement, parents, grandparents who are parenting again, and foster parents. Many older students even self-refer. Criteria for referrals include reading below grade level; excessive tardiness, truancy, or discipline problems; or challenging home conditions. Parental permission is required, and matches are based on the individual needs of each mentee.

Each mentor makes a serious long-term commitment to the program, and undergoes a series of safety measures, including a criminal background check, personal interview, and in-depth reference checks, followed by a three-hour training and orientation. Once the match has been made, the mentor and child meet for a minimum of one hour a week during the school day, in the Mentor Centers located on each participating school’s campus. There, they work on building a trusting, caring friendship, as well as improving the student’s academic performance. Mentors often get together with mentees off campus, outside the scheduled school day, to pursue common interests, as well as expose them to new experiences. As a result of these relationships, mentors help boost student self-esteem through mutual caring and respect.

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Promising Practices

A successful mentoring program requires more than dedicated volunteers. A key factor in the success of Stand By Me—which currently operates without the aid of any federal, state, or county grants—is a broad base of extraordinary community support. This support is composed of partnerships with local businesses, nonprofits, and community organizations that take many forms (see examples below).

As with any relationship, each partnership is unique and its quality and duration are informed by the individuals involved. Nevertheless, there are universally applicable strategies for building effective partnerships. Wondering how your program can expand partnerships to enhance the services you provide and increase long-term sustainability? Executive Director Witkowicki, offers the following tips:

- Select your board of directors or advisory council strategically. Based on your specific needs, look for individuals with the skills and connections you are looking for and invite them to serve on your board.
- Identify a dynamic spokesperson for your program who is energetic, enjoys her role, and truly conveys the passion of your mission. This person might be your program director or another staff member, but it could just as easily be a volunteer or a former mentee.
- Join local service clubs such as Rotary or Kiwanis yourself, rather than approaching them as an outsider asking for a handout. If you are a member of the “family” you and your program become a priority and the relationships you build can lead to even more potential partnerships.
- Leverage your volunteer base. Mentoring programs have a ready cadre of reliable, screened, caring, and dedicated volunteers. Witkowicki asks all her volunteers to spend a certain number of hours in support of fund raising and other events for program partners. Stand By Me mentors act as volunteers for several regularly held fund-raising events that

benefit multiple agencies; as a result, the program is frequently one of the beneficiaries. Witkowicki coordinates the volunteers herself, which adds value to the service they perform and also ensures that her volunteers have a high-quality experience.

- Cultivate relationships over time. Witkowicki has a budget dedicated for taking potential partners out to lunch to build relationships. “People have to eat,” she says. “Invite them out to pick their brains and tell them about your program at the same time. Then invite them to every event you have. And treat them like VIPs.”
- Market what your partners have done for you. Thank them in local papers and other media. As Witkowicki points out, “How can they leave you after that?!”
- Befriend the editor of your local newspaper. Especially in small communities, local newspapers are often read by everyone in the community. A strong relationship with the editor can yield prominent ad space or a front-page press release. In exchange, make the editor a VIP guest at any events you host.
- Every once in a while you find a partner willing to make a substantial contribution. Make the most of it. Use it in a public forum, such as a “Who Mentored You?” event, to generate matching funds. By offering the match, folks are inspired to give more.

In terms of staff time, building partnerships can be extremely time- and resource-intensive at the outset, but Stand By Me’s success serves as proof that it’s worth the effort. As Witkowicki points out, “When you establish the relationships and your merit as a program, partners begin calling you!”

Identify a dynamic spokesperson for your program who is energetic, enjoys her role, and truly conveys the passion of your mission.

Replicability

Every local community will have a different set of potential partners to tap into, but the range of partnerships leveraged by Stand By Me can certainly serve as inspiration. As you review the examples below, think about similar opportunities in your own area.

Marketing/Recruitment

- Each month, a different business in the community sponsors a Mentor Recruitment billboard, at a cost of \$1,000. In addition, a business or service club also sponsors cinema ads, which show before every movie in the six-screen Sonoma Cinemas.
- Multiple local business owners provide their employees with paid release time, encouraging staff members to mentor each week.
- The Sonoma Index Tribune, the community news source, donates a quarter-page ad each week, advertising the need for more mentors.
- The Sonoma Valley Realtors Association has invited the program to recruit mentors at their weekly Multiple Listing breakfast, and has donated in excess of \$10,000 over the years.
- Local churches allow program staff to speak during Sunday services about the need for mentors.

- Once each year, the Sonoma Valley Chamber of Commerce allows the program to insert a full-page ad in their Monthly Member Mailing, advertising the need to recruit more mentors from the business community.

Try it in your community: Even in the smallest communities, local businesses may be more than willing to lend their names to your efforts. Try pitching an ad on a placemat at the local diner or a pre-movie ad at the cinema. Reach out to places of worship and local civic organizations if you haven't already. Even businesses that cannot provide free or low-cost advertising may be persuaded to give their employees paid release time to serve as mentors (or volunteer for you in other ways). In addition to helping your program, it raises their profile in the community.

Not everyone lives in wine country, but perhaps there's another local industry you can tap into for support. Work with your board and staff to research companies that do significant business in your community and region.

Fund-Raising: Cash and In-Kind Donations

- Local restaurants offer a variety of friend-raising and fund-raising opportunities, auction items, and promotional dinners.
- On a Saturday evening each February, the El Dorado Kitchen puts on a six-course gourmet dinner for 40 guests, complete with food, wine, and wait staff donated by the restaurant. Each year, the dinner is held at a private estate belonging to a prominent community member, and the hosts invite their friends to come hear about the program while enjoying a fine dining experience. A local florist donates all the centerpieces. A local winery donates all the sparkling wine. Guests are then asked to make a healthy contribution to our cause, which many do after being wowed by their dining experience.
- Mentor Centers are almost completely furnished by donations from individuals and businesses, including all office furniture, conference tables and chairs, computers, and sports equipment.
- The mayor of Sonoma is a mentor, as have been various City Council members. The city of Sonoma has been extremely generous to the Mentoring Alliance, awarding more than \$60,000 in grant money over the years.
- A local art store donates unsold art supplies to the Mentor Centers twice a year, which amounts to a huge supply of new materials.
- The organization is a beneficiary of the NASCAR Grand Marshall Dinner, the PGA Senior Tour, the Harvest Wine Auction, and the BR Cohn Music Festival, all held annually.
- A partnership with the Sonoma Police Department provides LiveScan fingerprint services to all volunteer mentors at no cost to the volunteers or the program.
- Local wineries have been extremely supportive. One "adopted" Stand By Me and provided all the wine for the Annual Golf Tournament. Another purchased a new Toyota Prius that was auctioned off as a benefit for the organization. Yet another has donated more than \$200,000 to the program over the last five years through their fund-raising events.

- Local banks have sponsored fund-raising events, made grant awards, and allowed the program to hang mentor recruitment banners in their branches.

Try it in your community: Not everyone lives in wine country, but perhaps there's another local industry you can tap into for support. Work with your board and staff to research companies that do significant business in your community and region. Even in economic hard times, these companies need positive publicity and are interested in giving back to the communities in which they do business. Consider approaching local politicians, too. Like Sonoma's mayor, your local leaders will enjoy the great P.R. that volunteering to help youth can bring.

Health and Mental Health Services

- Licensed therapists, counselors, psychologists, and other mental health and social service professionals donate their time to conduct Mentor Roundtable Workshops, as part of a continuing education program.
- Eight local dentists collaborated with the local Sonoma Plaza Kiwanis Club to host a free Dental Clinic for all interested mentees. The Kiwanis Service Club provided all the volunteers for the daylong clinic, and the dentists provided dental hygiene goodie bags for every child that attended. Follow-up care was then divided among the eight dentists for young people without insurance coverage.
- Sonoma's two orthodontists have agreed to take on a small number of mentees each year who need orthodontia and cannot afford to pay for it.
- A local health club allows mentees age 14 and older to attend for free if accompanied by their mentors.
- A group of professional women get together each year to host a Girls' Grooming Workshop after school, in an effort to address good hygiene with mentees in middle school and high school. These women include three beauticians who provide tips on hair care, a skin care provider, a fitness instructor, a nutritionist, a nail care provider, and three local female dentists. They put together gift bags containing sample products for all the girls in attendance, as well as a Grooming Guide designed to address basic health and hygiene needs.

Try it in your community: Ask local health providers if they can offer services in support of your program. Local health and fitness facilities may be more than willing to offer free or reduced admission, especially during slow hours.

Facilities Support

- The Sonoma Rotary Club provided funds for the purchase of a storage shed to house extra office furniture and office supplies, as well as all fund-raising event needs.
- Members of Rotary and Kiwanis have been instrumental over the years in providing painting and landscaping services for all Mentor Centers, as well as the program's main offices.

Try it in your community: Local service clubs and school- and community-based service-learning projects are always looking for ways to help their communities. Invite local groups to pitch in on various maintenance tasks to keep your facilities costs down.

Match Activities

- The Sonoma Ecology Center works with the program to help expose mentees to a variety of outdoor projects that help the environment, such as creek clean-ups. The organization recently donated a plot designated for mentors and mentees to grow their own vegetables.
- A partnership with a local animal shelter in Sonoma facilitates field trips to introduce young people to the animals, and many mentees become weekend volunteers there as a result.
- The Sonoma Community Center offers a monthly after-school art class for mentors and mentees. Each month, a different artist teaches the class, and the participants are exposed to a different art medium.

Try it in your community: Do you have a local nature center? Animal shelter? Parks and recreation department? All these can provide access to activities that mentors and mentees can engage in together. In addition to strengthening relationships, volunteering together can foster a youth’s civic engagement far into the future.

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At the end of the day, partnering efforts—whatever their nature—have a common aim: increasing positive outcomes for youth. When programs leverage local partnerships to enhance their ability to provide high-quality services, volunteers, youth, and entire communities benefit. In the words of one Stand By Me mentee, “Growing up is hard! Having people outside the family to care about you and love you really helps with the process. One day, I know I will come back to Sonoma and become a mentor.”

Additional MRC Resources

MRC Case Study: *Strategies for Sustainability: Mentors Inc. and the Role of the Board* — http://www.edmentoring.org/pubs/board_study.pdf

Fact Sheet 21: *Building an Effective Advisory Committee* — <http://www.edmentoring.org/pubs/factsheet21.pdf>

Strategies for Finding and Building Local Support for Your Program: Collected Training Supplements and Materials from the MRC Web Seminar on Micro-Sustainability — http://www.edmentoring.org/pubs/microsustainability_book.pdf

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