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Mentor Me volunteers help at-risk youth in Petaluma

By Yovanna Bieberich

The guidance and company of a caring adult can make a world of difference in the life of a child, and since 2001, Petaluma-based Mentor Me has worked hard to provide at-risk youth in the community with mentors.

“January is National Mentoring Month and really our greatest need now is for mentors,” said Mentor Me’s executive director, Deborah Dalton.

Mentor Me was founded by a group of concerned parents, teachers and community members who wanted to find a way to support students at McNear Elementary School who were struggling to succeed in school and in life. The McNear Mentoring Program quickly grew to include other Petaluma schools and officially became known as Mentor Me Petaluma in 2004. As its services expanded beyond Petaluma, the organization’s name was shortened to Mentor Me in 2014.

Today, Mentor Me serves youth ages 5 to 17 in school districts in Novato and Petaluma. Last year, the nonprofit took over management of the Cavanagh Recreation Center, where Mentor Me is able to provide a variety of services in addition to being a place for mentors and mentees to hang out.

Each year, the organization hosts the popular Mad Hatter Ball, which will be held on April 2 at the Cavanagh Recreation Center.

“We offer tutoring, counseling and art and enrichment classes,” said Dalton of Mentor Me’s facility. “We have an art room and art workshops and cooking classes. Our game room has pool and shuffleboard and plenty of traditional game tables. We have a lending library, so if anyone has young adult or children’s books they want to donate, we’d love that.”

The Cavanagh also is home to a senior ping-pong group that plays twice a week, a swimming pool, gym and aerobics classes for older adults. Dalton said that the center is available for rent to the public for birthday parties and special events. Rental rates and information are available on Mentor Me’s website.

“It’s a multi-generational hub,” said Dalton. “It’s an intersection of intervention and recreation.”

Dalton said that Mentor Me needs about 90 new mentors who can commit to consistently spend one hour a day, once a week with their mentee. Anyone is welcome to volunteer to become a mentor.

“There isn’t any particular skill set or age group we’re looking for,” said Dalton. “It’s really people who enjoy being around kids and people who are open to just being with a child and letting that child guide their time together. You need to have an open heart, open mind and listen well. Those are the key components.”

Mentors must be at least 18 and can come from all different walks of life.

“Sometimes people think that you have to have money or be well-educated and successful to be a good mentor, but really none of that is required,” said Dalton. “People who come from difficult childhoods can

make awesome mentors. People who come from all kinds of adversity in their lives and have overcome them also make awesome mentors.”

Dalton added that she'd like to get veterans in the community involved with mentoring because their experiences can often help a child going through tough circumstances.

“Our veterans understand change,” said Dalton. “They go from a completely organized, structured life to being discharged and having to adjust and integrate into civilian life again. A lot of our kids come from backgrounds where they were transients or came from another county and were dropped here. They have to adjust to that.”

In addition to youth who come from troubled backgrounds, there is also a number of successful students in mainstream culture who perhaps made a mistake and now need help getting back on track.

“What I see happening to mainstream kids who have no other discipline problems is they are getting busted for things like having weed at school,” said Dalton. “They get expelled, the cops get called and they're charged with a misdemeanor or even felony drug charges. These are kids who would otherwise be on track to go to college. It shows how now more than ever kids from all different walks of life need mentors. It's not just always the rough and tumble troublemaker kind of kid.”

Mentors typically meet with their mentees on school campuses or at the Cavanagh Center to engage in a variety of activities, including games and outdoor activities to visiting a coffee shop or park.

In celebration of January being National Mentor Month, Mentor Me is partnering with the Petaluma Health Care District to offer a free screening of the documentary “Paper Tigers” at Boulevard Cinemas. The film is about Lincoln High School, an alternative school in Walla Walla, Wash. that specializes in educating traumatized youth.

“The film looks at how educators and mentors can help kids overcome adversity,” said Dalton. “It's powerful stuff.”

In addition to mentors, Dalton said Mentor Me is in need of individuals who would like to tutor kids. They also need people willing to volunteer around the office doing data entry and administrative support.

The County of Sonoma Board of Supervisors awarded Mentor Me the 2015 Jefferson Award for Public Service. The award is an acknowledgment of excellence in providing services to the public in Sonoma County. Mentor Me is one of five recipients chosen to receive the award, which was established in 1972 by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Senator Robert Taft Jr. and Sam Beard.

“Mentors are anchors,” said Dalton. “They are compass points. It's the person who for no other reason cares about you and jumps in to help you navigate all this change in life. They help you survive your childhood.”