

# Mentor Michigan

Program steers juveniles away from trouble

By Naseem Stecker

As he patiently weeds a patch of ground to grow cucumbers and tomatoes for his mother, 15-year-old DeJuan Hunter, a Detroit teenager who's had a brush with the law, is learning some of life's lessons. In the Southfield garden of his mentor, Mary Cauley, he's discovering that persistence, patience, and nurturing are essential in many endeavors.

He's also learning through Cauley's influence how to react more thoughtfully when trouble comes calling. He now ignores unkind remarks and taunts at school. "I just let it pass. I don't say anything. When I fight, I get kicked out of school and I miss my assignments and I can't catch up at home," Hunter said.

As they garden together on a sun-dappled Saturday afternoon, Cauley gently encourages her young friend, offering advice, tools,

and a guiding hand, hoping to stimulate fertile ground into yielding some choice summer produce. "That is DeJuan's own corner and he can grow whatever he likes there," she pointed out.

A partner in the Detroit-based law firm Plunkett and Cooney, Cauley has been mentoring Hunter for over a year and a half. Typically, participants in Mentor Michigan, a program designed to support and guide

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first-time nonviolent offenders, only requires mentors to commit to a year. In this case however, both parties like the arrangement so well that they plan to keep in touch indefinitely every other week. "How long will it continue? Until you're 40, DeJuan?" Cauley asks. "I can't go on any trip without thinking of bringing something back for him because he's my friend and so we're taking it as we go."

Together, they've visited bookstores, shopped, worked on a computer, read, completed craft projects, and shared some meals. They've also visited the Michigan Animal Rescue League to transport a couple of dogs to a retirement home where seniors can interact with them.

Cauley thinks that her mentee is maturing and developing a more active conscience. "I have come to care about him very deeply," she said. "I also want him to know that someone genuinely likes him and really respects him. He's a really neat kid, a very good person. Sometimes kids growing up don't always know that about themselves. So I would like him to know that about himself."

Cauley and Hunter were paired up through the Volunteers in Prevention program in Detroit, which receives referrals from the courts and which is a partner of Mentor Michigan. Mentor Michigan recruits, screens, trains, matches, and monitors adult mentors



DeJuan Hunter

with the juveniles who have committed a nonviolent offense. It was set up last year as a pilot program called 2000 for 2000: Michigan's Mentoring Initiative by the Prosecuting Attorneys Association of Michigan, First Lady Michelle Engler, Michigan Attorney General Jennifer Granholm, and former Pistons captain Isaiah Thomas.

Funded by the Hudson-Webber, Skillman, and Isaiah Thomas Foundations, Mentor Michigan has a major focus on Wayne County but also covers Washtenaw, Bay, Kalamazoo, Macomb, Oakland, Livingston, Midland, and Saginaw counties. According to Charles List, Director of Mentor Michigan, the number of truant kids in Wayne County alone is 60,000 and of those, 1,000 are chronic truants.

"By promoting a stay at school message, which is what we are trying to do with the presence of a mentor, the proof is there—the kids do go to school and the statistics show that they are less likely to get into trouble," List said. "A child that has a first contact with the law is 40 percent likely to return to recidivate and have another contact if they do not have a mentor. If they have a mentor, this rate is only 7 percent."

Research conducted by Public/Private Ventures, a national research organization, found that mentored youth were 52 percent less likely to skip school, 46 percent less likely to begin using illegal drugs, 37 percent less likely to skip a class, and 27 percent less likely to begin using alcohol.

Any adult who knows how to befriend a child can be a mentor. Jennifer Granholm, who has a very hectic schedule as attorney general, is a mentor. "I often tell people that I've got a pretty big job and three kids of my own, but if I can do it, you can too," Granholm said. "I mentor a young lady in Detroit who's really become part of my family. We read books together, we've been to the zoo, to a ball game, you name it. Just those few hours a week—the time I might have other-



*Attorney General Jennifer M. Granholm, former Pistons captain Isaiah Thomas, and First Lady Michelle Engler are partnering to promote mentoring in Michigan.*

wise spent going out to dinner or renting a movie—is absolutely priceless."

According to Granholm, the mentee is not the only one who benefits in this relationship. "To see the world through another person's eyes is really to experience it anew. My mentee has invited me into a part of the world that's very much different from the one I, and so many of us, live everyday. By doing that, she's helped me get a much deeper understanding of the challenges we still face as a state."

Mary Cauley decided to mentor because of a need to give something back. "Giving money never impressed me very much because I think when you give money, first of all large portions of it go to administrative costs for various charities. Not a whole lot of money goes to where it's really needed and I thought it was more valuable to just give my time, because frankly, that's my most precious commodity.... The other thing about the mentoring program that was critical to me was that it is known to reduce recidivism and to reduce truancy from school just by spending time with another person. Knowing that I could spend some time, and I was likely to

get some good results, that something good would come of it, was very attractive to me."

The president and chief executive officer of Plunkett and Cooney (where Cauley works), Henry Cooney, is committed to mentoring and encourages staff to be involved. Cooney, who heads one of the largest law firms in the state, is himself in the process of becoming a mentor. "We recognize the benefits of mentoring," he said, citing community service for lawyers and reduced rates of recidivism for juveniles. His firm promotes mentoring during meetings and discussions so that staff is aware of the opportunities to lend a hand to juveniles at a crossroads in their lives.

Volunteer mentors must be at least 21 years of age, own an automobile, and have insurance. They are required to get letters

of recommendation and to pass a criminal history check. According to List, an interview process is also involved. He stressed that interaction with the mentee and the ability to befriend a child is extremely important.

Over 50 percent of those who volunteer to mentor are members of the faith community, but lawyers are becoming increasingly involved in the process. "One of the key sectors as we see it is the legal community, because they have so much understanding, so much capacity to begin with. What more can we ask for than an understanding of the legal system and an ability to communicate with other people and to relate," List asked.

The long-term plan is to extend the program "to impact the juvenile justice system across the state so that every county in the state begins to utilize mentoring as the first step in dealing with juveniles who are getting into trouble," List added. For more information about this program call toll free 1-877-543-8722 or check their website at [www.ag.state.mi.us](http://www.ag.state.mi.us). ◆

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