Meet local men and women who help teens in foster care rise to their potential

by Shelley Ouellette

Fifty percent of young adults leave foster care without a high-school diploma or job

Statistics. Our society is fueled by them. And, while every living human wears the label of at least one, most do not want to be defined by or identified as a statistic. However, in the world of foster care, where children must be tracked by case numbers and files, tough statistics often become a challenging reality.

Statistics are no match for mentors, though, and Community Based Care of Central Florida (CBC) gives caring local adults the chance to make an immeasurable change in a young person's future. In fact, mentored children are more likely to graduate from high school, avoid drugs, stay off the streets, and succeed in life.

The volunteers in CBC's Legacy Mentor Program are changing the statistical narrative for the better. Sharing their time, experiences and hearts, mentors become a positive influence for young people as they navigate life and journey toward adulthood. These are the inspiring stories of three Seminole County residents who have discovered that the gift of mentorship is just as much about what can be gained when one gives.

Brittany Sobering
Business Owner

Q: What is your greatest takeaway from the mentorship experience?

A: The trajectory of a person's life certainly starts with the family they are raised in. But even when that is upended, there is still hope when you give young people in foster care encouragement, resources, consistency, and unconditional love and support. Just like great parents offer these things to their own children, when you have the chance to offer these things to someone who was deprived of those values in their early life, do it! There is truly nothing to be scared of - once you dive into a relationship with another human who needs positive people around, you'll find it blossoms just as much as it does them!

Q: What has this role taught you about society?

A: Every person has a gift, something to share with the world. Their story, their experience, what gives them joy, their potential. You'll find all sorts of differences between generations, but that human connection is still what matters. It's what crosses not only generations, but also socioeconomic and cultural boundaries...and is so needed. For kids who are in many ways alone in the world (and living on their phone screens), having someone to listen and care may just be what prompts them to grow and achieve what they otherwise thought impossible.

Q: How has serving as a mentor positively impacted your life?

A: My compassion for kids with difficult histories has grown immensely. Understanding the behaviors and mind-sets of foster youth has opened my heart and mind, motivating me to do even more for these kids.
**Angela Finucane**  
Senior Accounting Specialist

**Q:** Describe one of your favorite moments with your mentee.

**A:** After seeing my mentee for a few months, I still questioned if I was making an impact. Then, on a Saturday night, she texted me to say she was upset about something, and we texted back and forth until she said she felt better. I got a blue heart emoji, and that was such a good feeling.

**Q:** How has serving as a mentor impacted you personally?

**A:** I was unable to have biological children, so this allows me to serve as a surrogate mom, in a way. Not to take over the role of her mother, but to be an extension. It is rewarding to have conversations and feel like what I am saying is having an impact on her. We were together recently, and she was saying she only had a few real friends and that I was one of them. That made me feel good.

**Q:** What advice would you give someone considering becoming a mentor?

**A:** Be prepared for a rollercoaster of emotions and feeling like you may not be getting through. You also have to make sure you set boundaries and not become too familiar. There are a lot of highs and lows with kids in foster care, and you have to stay strong and roll with whatever comes up – good or bad.

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**Craig Kesler**  
Real Estate Broker/Owner

**Q:** What inspired you to become a mentor?

**A:** I very clearly understand the need for mentors in society and feel that foster kids have some of the greatest needs for adult guidance to help them develop into happy and productive citizens. I myself had a mentor starting at age nine and greatly benefited from it. I now understand exactly how my mentor helped me grow into a happy and successful member of society.

**Q:** What advice would you give someone considering becoming a mentor?

**A:** Don’t let it scare you. It will change your life and the life of your mentee in a positive way. When working with your mentee, be honest, and they will trust you. Be yourself, and they will open up to you. And be gentle because they have wounds that are still healing.

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**You Can Do This**

The CBC Legacy Mentor Program matches teens and young adults between the ages of 13 and 23 with a positive role model from the community. Mentors come from many walks of life, some of them having little to no experience within the foster-care system, and some have come back after many years of being in the system in order to make a greater difference.

Mentors do not serve the same role as a case manager or foster/adoptive parent. They have a unique opportunity to bring their outside perspectives in and listen to the stories of our youth with a compassionate heart.

Mentors take their mentees on outings to expand their horizons and have a little fun, teach life skills, and serve as a listening ear for life’s ups and downs. Prospective mentors must be at least 25 years old and have the ability to drive.

A background check and training is required prior to being matched with your mentee.

“[What these kids need more than anything is your time and consistency],” says Camber Page, CBC’s youth services program coordinator. “Their basic needs are met in the foster-care system, but they need good examples of stable adults that have careers and live in the real world. Most importantly, they need to know they matter to someone else.”

To learn more about becoming a CBC volunteer mentor, contact Camber at 321-441-2081 or Camber.Page@CBCCFL.org.