

EDGEWOOD MIDDLE SCHOOL MENTORING PROGRAM IMPROVES YOUTHS' DAY TO DAY LIFE

Stepping Stones builds one-on-one relationship

By LINDA HALL Staff Writer Published: May 3, 2013 4:00AM

WOOSTER DISTRICT -- Edgewood Middle School fifth-grade student Heaven Mullen has no lack of friends or family members, but over the past school year, a special friend in her life with whom she meets weekly has given her an extra advantage.

Mullen is a mentee in a new program called Stepping Stones, described by STEPS at Liberty Center as a "unique relationship between an adult and a child. Our role is not to make it better for them, but to help them make it better for themselves."

Mullen's mentor, Phyllis Jones, STEPS' youth mentoring coordinator and Teen Institute adviser, said she has never told Mullen, "Don't ever do that again" in regard to any situation in her life.

But Jones has listened to and advised Mullen as she puzzles out her problems on her own.

"There was a lot of drama I had to deal with (one day)," Mullen said, having to do with a conflict between her cousin and one of her friends.

"(Jones) told me a few things I could do," Mullen recalled, including just "walk away."

One of the focal points of Stepping Stones is checking in with one another, Jones said. "The first thing we talk about (in each session) is, what's (today) like for you?"

The next questions are, "What do you want it to be like, and how do you get there?" Jones said.

"Heaven has tools to solve her own issues," Jones said, bringing to bear one of the tenets of the program -- "a deep belief in the potential of each youth (and) unconditional positive regard."

The pair rarely has touched on the topic of school report cards, but they did talk about how Mullen could improve her grade in science.

"You said you wanted to do something in science (class) to keep you awake," Jones reminded Mullen, whose science period is the next to the last one of the day.

"I usually get tired at the end of the day ... from all of the work," Mullen said. "(Jones) gave me this squishy thing (to squeeze)."

Mullen no longer has to use it, however, she said, because on her own, she told Jones, "I unhooked my T.V. and took it out of my room," removing the temptation to stay up late and watch it.

"We're friends," Jones said. While advice and problem-solving are part of the mix, other components are having fun and pursuing mutual interests.

"When we first started (meeting) in October, we did some things to get to know each other," Jones said, "and found out we're people who like to do things for other people."

They put out feelers around the school about their desire to help and then got right to it.

Their "random acts of kindness" included writing thank-you notes for people to whom they wanted to express gratitude at Thanksgiving and putting together snack items to mix up for special needs students.

"We usually do nice things for people," Mullen said, adding, such as "clean(ing) up around the school."

Activities have focused on a "'we' relationship," or working together, Jones said, but also on "ways we can connect to the school," Jones said, stressing, "Kids who are connected to the school do better academically ... and make better choices."

Their purely fun activities included a spa day -- because "we should also take care of ourselves," Mullen said.

Listening to music, using lavender lotion and learning breathing techniques are tools to use for that purpose, according to Jones.

"Listen Ears" was a mentoring program used previously in the district; Edgewood Principal Dean Frank wanted to pursue a program like that once again, Jones said.

"We started recruiting," Jones said, through parent organizations, service clubs and organizations and churches.

Edgewood guidance counselor Connie Mann selected the children to be part of Stepping Stones.

"This year there were 70 mentor/mentee pairs in the Stepping Stones program -- 48 at Orrville Middle School, 10 at Edgewood Middle School and 12 at The College of Wooster," Jones said.

Those interested in being a Stepping Stones mentor should contact Jones at 330-264-8498, Ext. 115.

Reporter Linda Hall can be reached at 330-264-1125, Ext. 2230, or lhall@the-daily-record.com.