

Tutor-mentor programs need you to step up

Mike Mazzuca has worked with four kids in his nine years as a volunteer tutor and mentor in Cabrini-Green.

He's lost track of one of them. Another is in prison on drug charges. But he considers the other two to be success stories.

Of his successes, one is starting college this year. The other dropped out of high school but with Mazzuca's help was able to enroll in an alternative high school and is now getting a start in the building trades.

Nobody says it's going to be easy if you decide you want to make a difference in a young person's life as a tutor and mentor, but they say you'll get a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment that you might not derive from your day job.

For Mazzuca, it filled a gap in his own life.

"Until I start a family of my own, there has to be something more than just going to work every day and going home and just hanging out," said Mazzuca, 37, who works as a compensation analyst for a consulting company and hangs out at his Lincoln Square condo when he isn't doing his tutoring work for Cabrini Connections.

As students and teachers return to school this month, tutor-mentor programs throughout the Chicago area are restocking their ranks of volunteers to prepare for the year ahead. Over the next three days, volunteer recruitment fairs will be held at numerous locations to find adult volunteers willing to donate their time and effort to any of more than 100 local programs that tutor and mentor kids.

I don't know where people find the time, but thankfully they do. And by doing so, their work im-

MARK BROWN



e-mail:
markbrown@
suntimes.com

proves the quality of life for all of us. I thought I could at least give them a little attention.

So, what kind of time commitment do these programs want?

Whatever you can spare, they say, whether that's a couple hours a week or just one day a month.

At Cabrini Connections, which is in its 10th year of serving Cabrini-Green students, Mazzuca said a volunteer can typically expect to spend two hours on tutoring one night per week, coupled with some sort of social activity with the student every few weekends, which can be as simple as having them over for dinner.

Of course, they can also get as deeply involved as Mazzuca, who has been known to track down and pester youths who drop out of the program until he gets them back on track. He still writes regularly to the former student who is in prison and has even visited him there.

"Tutoring ended up being something different than I envisioned it to be when I started," Mazzuca admitted.

What he had envisioned was more of an academic situation. The kids would bring in their homework, and he would tutor them in math or writing or whatever.

But a lot of kids don't bring any homework with them, Mazzuca learned. That's when you have to

concentrate on the mentoring side of the program, which can be a lot more challenging.

The key, he found, was to build up the trust level of the kids with whom he was working so that they cared about what he thought of them. After that, he could work on changing their view of society and their place in it, teaching them to take more responsibility for themselves and to stop blaming the obstacles in their lives—the broken families, poverty and racism—that may lead others in their situation to give up.

One of his kids was doing terrific work and earned a scholarship to attend the private high school of his choice. He chose De La Salle and was earning good grades there when he suddenly quit and dropped out, succumbing to the lure of the street life.

"That threw me for a loop," said Mazzuca.

But he wouldn't quit on the kid. He tracked him down and went back again and again.

"He didn't want to talk to me," Mazzuca said of the teen.

Eventually, though, with the support of others in the program, he wore him down and got him back on track.

That's an empowering experience.

"There's a great sense of pride when you see a kid get it and see that he has control over his life, and he decides to aim for the better instead of the status quo," Mazzuca said.

These days Mazzuca works as Cabrini Connections' volunteer coordinator, helping others learn the ropes of tutoring and mentoring while staying involved with those he's worked with in the past.

"He keeps stepping up what he's



Tutoring at Cabrini-Green (above) has been an empowering experience for volunteer Mike Mazzuca.

—JOHN H. WHITE/SUN-TIMES

willing to do to help these kids," said Dan Bassill, president of Cabrini Connections and the Tutor/Mentor Connection, which supports tutoring programs throughout the city with training workshops and seminars.

There aren't many people out there willing to make the kind of commitment that Mazzuca has made. But I know that there are a lot of folks who are always looking for the right opportunity to help.

Anyone wanting more information on tutor-mentor programs can call (312) 492-9614 or check out the Web site, www.tutormentorexchange.net.

You might find that helping these kids gives you back more than you give up.