

Mentoring Gives Volunteers a Sense of Connection to Students in Howard County

An article by Larry Carson, A-OK Mentoring & Tutoring volunteer

To me, Larry Carson, returning to elementary school to spend an hour a week with a small boy as part of the A-OK Mentoring/tutoring program felt right in a number of ways.

First, it gave me a sense of connection to the young, apart from my own now middle-aged children and fast-growing grandkids.

The times are very different from when my own daughter attending Howard County schools, the math is very different, as are other aspects of public school, but I found the kids to be kind, inquisitive, and engaging.



I hadn't played kids games like Jenga, Connect 4, and War or Uno for decades, and reading the Sunday funnies or a children's book I spent time carefully picking out of the county library returned my own feelings of being connected.

All was not fun and games, of course. Sometimes - alright most of the time - I could not fathom what my boy was thinking or feeling. I often despaired about whether I was making a difference or not. I spotted his name once on a bulletin board list in the hallway of kids doing great class work. I'd had no idea.

When I first started about a decade ago, I worried that my first student, a third-grade boy, might feel stigmatized by meeting with me during school hours in a public place in the building. I found exactly the reverse was true. Other kids stopped by and asked if they could play, and clearly envied him.

I slowly came to realize that no matter what was said, how impulsively a child behaved or how angry he may seem from time to time, he valued the central idea of [A-OK Mentoring & Tutoring](#): that an adult was coming to see him and him alone every single week, and if an absence was unavoidable, he would know ahead of time.

Natalie Rook, a retired nurse with prior experience as a school volunteer in Western Maryland, said she too has had ups and downs, but for the last few years, even through the pandemic, "I feel good. This is probably the best [mentoring] experience I've had."

Natalie's grown daughter, a speech pathologist, encouraged her to become a reading volunteer in Washington county, after she retired from her nursing career. She later moved to Howard County, and for the last few years she's been meeting with a young girl who even in third grade, was clearly "mature beyond her years, Rook said.

They play games too, but often have conversations that have enabled Rook to impart a bit of worldly wisdom, or help with a small frustration at home. That relationship took time to develop, despite the disruptions from Covid-19. They continued to meet via Zoom during the pandemic and maintained their relationship. This year, their in-person sessions began in mid-October and have continued successfully.

"She wants to see me. She knows I am helping her," Rook said. "We are big fans of this program, and Ms. Natalie," says the mentee's parent.

A-OK Mentoring & Tutoring connects volunteers with students, and our mentor-tutors make a difference in the life of a child. All it takes is one hour a week, and a positive, resilient attitude. Volunteers can meet in-person in school, during afterschool or weekend school-based programs, or via the virtual mentoring program using Zoom.

Please consider becoming a volunteer mentor-tutor with A-OK," director, Amanda Mummert said. "We need caring adults who are ready to invest in the next generation with time, laughter, and kindness." Anyone interested can contact A-OK at aokmentor@gmail.com, call or text 443-895-2457, or visit the group's website at www.aokmentor.org, and www.Facebook.com/aokmentors