

SK CARES looking for volunteers for mentor program

By Bill Seymour
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SOUTH KINGSTOWN — SK CARES is looking for some caring individuals who want to be mentors to young people seeking inspiration and sometimes just a friend.

"The mentor program is truly a special among our volunteer programs at SK CARES. It helps some of the more vulnerable kids in our community who need a positive adult connection in their lives," said Deb Zepp, mentor coordinator.

Right now, Zepp has 10 students needing mentors, but no volunteers to match with them. Another 13 students have been matched with mentors in South Kingstown schools and, she said, anyone interested in volunteering can complete an application at skcares.org.

One of those mentors is Ron Berube, a retired school teacher and experienced mentor for young children.

"I bring my 30 years of teaching and working with kids. I've always enjoyed working with kids," said Berube who has

used interest in Legos, lawn mower engines and computers to connect to his mentees.

"One year we took a lawn mower engine completely apart and put it all back together again," he recalled about working with one child. This year his mentee is in first grade and lots of Legos are helping to build the connection during their one-hour weekly get-togethers, Berube added.

"He's six years-old. I have a grandson that age and that helps with making our connection. I know how to get along with kids that age," he said.

SK CARES grew out of a 1995 survey on the need for volunteers to help strengthen the school-community relationship. Each year, SK CARES recruits, trains and places volunteers representing community members, parents, college and university students, and high

school students.

These individuals collectively give thousands of hours in the classroom and classroom-related activities.

However, the mentor program each year does not recruit enough volunteers to help fulfill the needs of these special students. This year Zepp carried over several unfulfilled requests from last year and, after filling them, has a total of 10 new students wanting mentors.

Students are recommended for the program by parents, grandparents, social workers and school principals, she said.

While SK CARES draws hundreds of volunteers, including parents nearby University of Rhode Island students and other community members, most only want to work in a classroom rather than one-on-one setting in the mentor program, Zepp said.

In the mentor program the supportive connection between an adult and child – regardless of what they do with each other during the visit – is what is most important, not academic work, Zepp explained.

"The mentors come from a variety of backgrounds and bring their special area, such as knitting, computers, and other hobbies or interests they have," she said.

Berube, of South Kingstown, has been a mentor for five years with SK CARES. Most of those years he spent with one young child who starting in third grade was matched with him. In eighth grade the two parted when the budding teen moved to upstate New York.

Each child is different and that makes every effort unique. "You cannot go in with expectations that something will happen. You cannot expect that the glacier will melt," Berube said, adding, "Most of it is like just being there for them."

Berube experience as a mentor started in 2004 after retiring from teaching and volunteering with a state child services agency, later he joined SK CARES. The foundation for his work, though, is rooted in his 30-year teaching career in industrial arts and computer technology, he pointed out.

Zepp, who does the screening and matching in the mentor program, knows how these connections work. She was an elementary school teacher for 18 years and next spent 10 years as principal of Matunuck Elementary School.

She said candidates are interviewed, undergo a background check and match a list of interests with their mentee.

"That interest inventory list helps to start the discussion, the communication, so that they can get to know each other," she said.

As they become more connected, the important part of the program takes shape. The mentor and mentee can develop trust, which gives them opportunity to build a relationship – and one that can last a lifetime, said Zepp and Berube, who still keeps in touch with a person he mentored through the child services organization.

"You just got to be there for them," said Berube, "and sometimes just listening. There are other times you'll need to say stuff that needs to be said. You won't be that friend agreeing with everything they do."

"Eyeball to eyeball is what really counts," he said, "for both of us to connect."