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# Friends For Youth Mentoring Institute

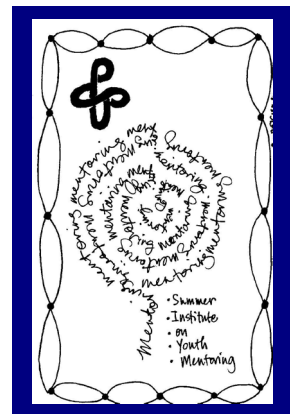
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## CONNECTIONS

Summer 2007

### Notes from the First Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring

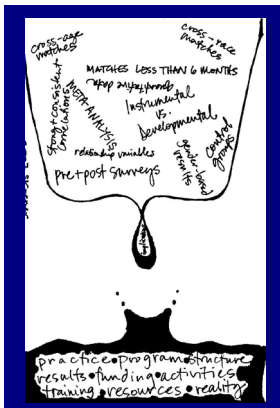
From July 16th - 20th, I had the privilege of attending the first Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring at Portland State University in Oregon. Sponsored by PSU and hosted by Tom Keller, Ph.D., and the Duncan and Cindy Campbell Professor for Children, Youth, and Families with an Emphasis on Mentoring in the Graduate School of Social Work, about thirty other participants gathered each and every day for a full eight hours of instruction, discussion, and enlightenment. The 2007 Research Fellows, Timothy Cavell, Ph.D., Carla Herrera, Ph.D., Michael Karcher, Ph.D., and Renee Spencer, Ed.D., and Guest Speaker Julia Pryce, Ph.D., presented their latest “bleeding edge” research in the mentoring field. The practitioners and advocates (myself and staff from the National Mentoring Center, National Mentoring Partnership, and Oregon Mentors) scratched our heads more than once and enthusiastically engaged in dialogue about their findings. Two weeks later, I am still thinking about these conversations and connections made and will probably continue to do so for some time.



This issue of *Connections* will feature some of my thoughts, as expressed through images, as the week progressed. Being an artist and not completely comfortable with some of the statistical findings presented, I created a small book and recorded what I could while the presentations continued. One participant commented on my cover illustration, the labyrinth of mentoring above, that she just kept following it to see where it ended up. I replied, “That’s exactly how I view mentoring!”

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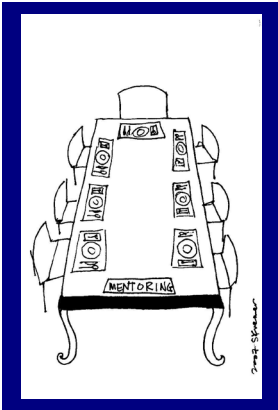
### DISTILLATION



From the first several presentations, it was clear that my task as an advocate for and consultant to mentoring programs at the Summer Institute was going to be about distillation. How can I help programs with all of this new knowledge? By translating the technical bits into implications for program practices, structure, activities, and training to help them with their results, funding, and resources, and basing it all in reality. Each researcher discussed specific mentoring interventions with equally specific populations of children and youth; how can we translate that into broad strokes to inform the whole field? And what exactly is a relationship variable?

As it is expressed here, it may happen on a drop-by-drop basis, but I will be doing my best to bring you this information.

## THE MENTORING TABLE



One thought I continue to have in my work in mentoring is about who is a part of the conversation on what mentoring is? In other words, who is invited to sit at the mentoring table? And who is not invited and why? Mentoring is not its own exclusive field (yet - if you have interest in supporting this effort, join the newly formed **Association of Mentoring Professionals** by going to [www.mentoringprofessionals.org](http://www.mentoringprofessionals.org) and completing a membership form online or call **888-AMP-2844**), and it has grown from the guidance of professionals from other fields: volunteering, social work, psychology, prevention, education, juvenile justice. “Mentoring” has been used in every conceivable context to describe a kind of guiding relationship, from adults to adults, adults to youth, and youth to youth; in one-time contacts to a 12-year commitment; to focus on building a career,

learning how to hunt, applying to college, or hanging out with someone like an older sibling. Is it time for a definable field of “youth mentoring”? The National Mentoring Partnership has convened a roundtable to discuss accreditation (go to [http://www.mentoring.org/mentor\\_minute/mentor\\_to\\_spearhead\\_national\\_discussion\\_on\\_accreditation.php](http://www.mentoring.org/mentor_minute/mentor_to_spearhead_national_discussion_on_accreditation.php) for more information); it appears as if they already have an idea how thorny of an issue this will be since this is only an “exploratory process to determine the advisability and feasibility of an accreditation process.” If the table is set for youth mentoring programs who are concerned about safety and effectiveness, how do we continue to converse with the tables next to us, the ones with adult mentoring, academic mentoring, volunteer classes, apprenticeship programs, tutoring, and other youth development professionals?

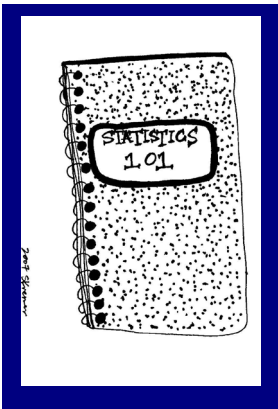
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## HELP!

There is no need to explain this image. After spending the good part of an hour wondering why I decided to choose a graduate program that did not require any statistics prerequisite courses and did not delve into any during the actual courses, I refocused back on the research being presented and concentrated on terms like “statistically significant” and “n factors.” Timothy Cavell thankfully repeated an often-quoted saying that I like: “There’s lies, then there’s damn lies, then there’s statistics.” And all the researchers agreed that the practice of mentoring is light years ahead of the research!

The number of mentoring researchers is relatively small and it is not too difficult to discover what they are interested in exploring. They also have many tools in their belts for helping programs do their own research, a.k.a. evaluation. Evaluation is one of the most requested yet lowest rated technical assistance topic in my experience as a consultant and trainer. There is no one-size-fits-all (Hello, researchers? Is this possible?), so programs have to cut and paste from available sources to find adequate tools to measure their outcomes, once they have decided upon those. Tom Keller remarked that once he decided to go back to graduate school, after working

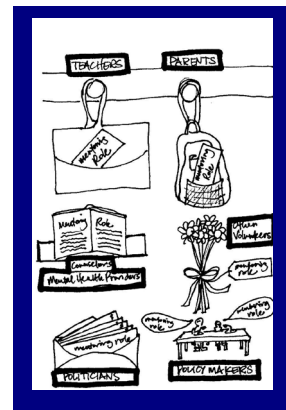
at a mentoring program, he discovered wonderful already-designed measurements that could have helped him in assessing his program’s effectiveness. When you create your own evaluation process from different sources, it’s easy to feel as if you are reinventing the wheel and that you may not get the outcomes you had hoped.



Several discussions ensued regarding the use and abuse of statistics, especially the data gathered from the first large-scale study from 1995, *Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers Big Sisters*. We have all seen programs that are not even remotely similar to the ones studied use the outcomes as proof that mentoring works. I see a need for a more thorough understanding of how/why mentoring works and in what conditions/structures. And then good summaries of these studies!

## EDUCATING OTHERS ON THE MENTORING ROLE

Evolving from the Mentoring Table illustration and a discussion within our group, the idea of defining a “mentoring role” sounds attainable. We already train mentors about their roles (what they are and what they are not); why not develop material to help others learn more about how they can tap into mentoring in a different context? When I ask adults about their own early mentors, many identify their **parents** as mentors, for all the times they motivated and guided their children through life decisions. **Teachers** are another popular category for mentors; one of my earliest mentors was an artist who “taught” art to me and my high school art teacher continued her inspiration. There is something of a trend in **mental health** lately for **service providers** (counselors, therapists, social workers, etc.) to take on more of an advocate or friend stance with their clients. A local school district’s counseling department recently instructed its social work interns to not practice case management skills with the children on their case loads, but instead, to build a relationship with them, providing a positive, transformative experience. There are perhaps hundreds of thousands of volunteer adults who regularly interact with children in capacities other than mentoring; the potential for providing more safe and effective relationships to more children is enormous with these **other volunteers**. **Politicians** and **policy makers** have some understanding about youth mentoring, as evidenced by the recent Department of Education Mentoring grants and the Mentoring Children of Prisoners grants through the Department of Health and Human Services. However, program design and expected outcomes have been unrealistic, according to some grantees, so there is more work to do there. A clear and concise document could have positive implications for future grantees and, as always, for more youth who need safe and effective mentoring relationships.



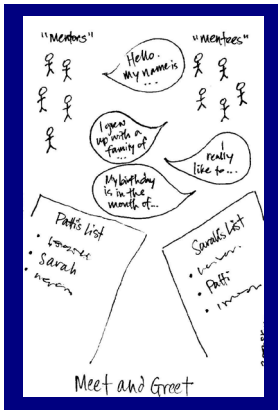
## MENTOR TOUCHSTONES OR MENTOR TOUCHTONES

During Renee Spencer’s presentation about high-quality mentoring relationships and why sometimes mentoring relationships fail, a familiar conversation spontaneously started: how can we identify potential volunteers who just don’t have what it takes to be an effective mentor? (If you have any questions about what it takes to be a safe mentor, please email or call me directly - I’d be happy to discuss how to **Screen Applicants for Effectiveness!**) How can we assess someone’s willingness to just keep going, especially when the going gets tough? Many participants shared their ideas about how they support and provide ongoing training for mentors, as well as good retention strategies. Someone mentioned “mentor touchstones” as an idea for short, memorable pieces of advice to pass along to frustrated mentors. I interpreted this directly, imagining actual stones with etchings that motivate and inspire mentors to not give up. As an art therapist, I believe in the power of ritual and the power of experiences. Would it make a difference for a mentor to have a small stone that says, “Be There” in his pocket every time he sees his mentee, knowing it will seem like pulling teeth to get a conversation going? Would it make a difference for a mentor to have a small stone that says “Relax and Have Fun” on her desk at work that she sees out of the corner of her eye when she starts thinking of how her mentee is not engaged in school? After sharing this image with the group, several people suggested, in unison, “Solid As A Rock” as another saying. Would it make a difference between a relationship continuing and succeeding or stopping and failing? Would it be worthwhile to find out?

The same participant who first said, “mentor touchstone” actually said “mentor touchtone” at first, and I thought of a toll-free number mentors could call and hear inspirational messages when absolutely needed! I’ll let you know when I have the mentor hotline up and running.



## MEET AND GREET



Michael Karcher led us through an exercise he created to match mentors and mentees in school-based programs, when everyone starts and ends at the same time. Each “mentor” in a small group introduced him- or herself to each “mentee.” The pairs then tried to find similarities in their family situations, birthday month, or hobbies and interests. After talking with everyone, each “mentor” and “mentee” wrote down the names of three people they enjoyed meeting. Michael then collected the papers and “matched” us the next day. Each person in a pair appeared on the other’s list, and everyone was chosen by someone else! Patti MacRae, another advocate of mentoring programs at the National Mentoring Center, and I were “matched” and I felt very special for the rest of the week knowing that she enjoyed meeting me as much as I enjoyed meeting her. That sensation reminded me to

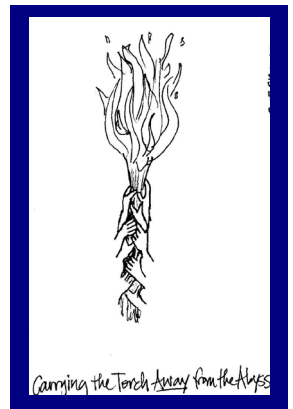
not overlook or discount the power of feeling special in someone else’s eyes. Do we, as mentoring professionals, often skip this magical moment to get to the logistics of signing contracts or explaining process? How can we help mentors and mentees notice these moments more, to help them continue to build their relationships and ultimately have an impact? And, Patti, when are we going for ice cream?

## CARRYING THE TORCH AWAY FROM THE ABYSS

A local reporter from the *Oregonian* attended Monday night’s Panel Discussion and Reception, interviewing Tom Keller and Renee Spencer about the Summer Institute and mentoring research in general. In a story entitled, “Following a torch into the abyss” (see [http://www.oregonlive.com/news/oregonian/steve\\_duin/index.ssf?/base/news/118480652247310.xml&coll=7](http://www.oregonlive.com/news/oregonian/steve_duin/index.ssf?/base/news/118480652247310.xml&coll=7) for the full story), the reporter remarks upon what he considers his own “failed” mentoring experience. I expect that what really happened is similar to many mentoring relationships when a mentor’s expectations of radical and swift changes aren’t met; his mentee apparently called him the day following the reception and there is a moment of hope in his eyes as the story ends. (For a real downer, I recommend watching the 2002 movie *Stevie* by Steve James, director of *Hoop Dreams*. In this film, he returns to connect with a young man he mentored years ago and follows his life as it continues to unravel.)

Given the incredible information shared at the Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring and the talented, generous, and impressive roster of participants, I have great faith that together we can carry that torch away from the abyss. The opportunity to engage with practitioners, researchers, and advocates can only produce better programs and, as a result, better outcomes for all the youth we serve.

Look for more information from the Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring as the year progresses and keep your eyes open for next year’s application process.



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**MENTORING INSTITUTE**

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