

Mentoring USA: Transforming lives one child at a time



As the notion of “service” starts taking the nation by storm, Matilda Raffa Cuomo has been blazing the trail since her tenure as first lady of New York State (1983 – 1995). Today, as founder and chairperson of Mentoring USA, she continues to move full speed ahead in expanding her premier mentoring organization to help transform children across the nation and globally.*

Mentoring USA believes that the presence of a caring adult in a young person’s life helps his self-esteem, strengthens relationships with peers and adults, improves academic performance and attendance, and helps combat school drop-out.

Mentoring USA partners with public schools, nonprofit organizations, corporations, foster care agencies, housing facilities and community centers across New York City. The organization partnered with Citibank, New Yorkers for Children and NYC Children's Services on a Youth Financial Empowerment initiative for children aging out of foster care. They also work with USTA and Cornell Cooperative Extension to teach Healthy Lifestyles and Self Esteem to the mentees involved in the program. Volunteer mentors meet one-to-one with their mentees at a designated time and location for a minimum of four hours a month during the academic year in a supervised group setting to discuss the above issues, academics and more.

AARP New York honored Matilda Cuomo as one of its 50th Anniversary Champions of Social Change. AARP recently spoke with Matilda Cuomo on the heels of a whirlwind month of activity for National Mentoring Month to find out more about Mentoring USA and how others can get involved with making a difference in the lives of children.

Your public service resume both during and after your 12 years as first lady of New York State includes a big focus on families and children.

That’s right. I was honorary chair of the New York State Council on Children and Families which gave me the opportunity to bring together all of the agencies that work with children and families. And that was so important – bringing together agencies across the board including health, education, and social services. Because think about it. If you say a child is suffering from an addiction, such as alcoholism or an eating disorder – *everyone* across the board in the family suffers. Working and partnering with these commissioners in such a positive way to change children’s lives was really a wonderful and memorable experience for me.



Photo credit: Jerritt Clark

So was this where the seeds of Mentoring USA started to sprout for you?

Essentially, Mentoring USA grew from a program I started in 1987 called the New York State Mentoring Program, which again I organized with a bipartisan committee made of the best children's advocates across the political parties. This was a one-to-one, school-based mentoring program that aimed to stem the trend of high school drop outs, teen pregnancies, and drug use among our state's youth. This was the first such program in the country. These were students who were identified by their teachers as kids who needed somebody. Because of its emphasis, it turned out to be the model that Barbara Bush replicated across the country. By 1994, we reached over 10,000 kids.

What do you think makes Mentoring USA work?

I'd say two things. First, it's the *training* for the mentor. By far, training is the heart and soul of the program. Mentors receive five hours of training in how the program works, cultural diversity, nutrition, healthy lifestyles, and self-esteem. With the help from teachers and our program staff, we match students and mentors beautifully.

And this training could not take place without our great staff who support our mentors. You need a lot of passion and compassion to do this job and we have program managers and coordinators who work closely with our schools and mentors.

Second, it's the *one-on-one* relationship. When a young person has dysfunction in his or her life, a trained mentor who is serving as a positive, one-to-one role model, and providing guidance and sustained values can really change a life.

For the kids – the difference that a mentor makes can never be overstated. And this changes how the mentors feel about themselves. The little things that can stay in a child's mind, names he's called when he's not the same. Our training has a cultural diversity component so that we teach children to be proud of their culture and heritage, and that their music, dance, food, and background are beautiful no matter where they come from. When you teach a child to love herself for who she is, you change too.

This is why the program has been able to flourish nationally and internationally. We're in New York City, Houston, Los Angeles, Newark, and internationally in Spain and Italy, too.

What is the commitment for the mentor?

We ask for at least one full hour a week and a one-year commitment. I visit a lot of programs and I can tell you



Photo credit: Jerritt Clark

that the bonding and the new relationship that is formed – it’s like a miracle. It literally transforms the child and the mentor. By far, most people continue on after the first year.

Where does your commitment to mentoring come from?

As a grandmother of 13 children, my mantra has always been that there are three pillars of support for children: home, school, community. If one of those pillars is broken, the child suffers; if they are all broken, the child is nowhere. That’s why the mentoring is so important. The teacher knows which child in the classroom needs someone to pick him up. Children who succeed despite personal, economic or social obstacles do so because of caring, competent adults who believe in them. And the research shows it too. Our own research documents the positive changes in the child’s attitudes and behaviors as a result of the one-to-one mentoring relationship.

To what do you contribute the success of Mentoring USA?

The program flourishes because the need is there - otherwise I could just learn to golf!

But, seriously, I’ve seen it work. I’ve seen these kids: their grades do go up, their whole attitude changes. It’s an amazing phenomenon.

And for the mentor – it makes you a better person in the long run; you’ll find you’re more interested and more understanding of things that go on. It’s energizing.

O.K. Last and most important question – how can someone get involved or find out more information?

You saved the easiest question for last! It’s very simple. Go to www.mentoringusa.org and click on the “Become A Mentor” tab on the right side of the homepage and you’ll see the 5 easy steps that will start you on the path to becoming a mentor and changing some young person’s life.

*Mentoring USA is part of HELP USA, a national nonprofit that provides shelter, jobs, and services for the homeless. Find out more at www.helpusa.org.

