

# Inside Look: Parent Shares Mentorship Impacts

## Summary of Interview with Robin Thrall

I've walked many different career paths throughout my life; commercial art, advertising design, paralegal, real estate appraising, managing a dental office, but it wasn't until I was older that something hit me and hit me hard, I wanted more kids! I was a single mom with a biological daughter when I learned that I could adopt as a single parent. Through James City County Department of Social Services my journey began as a foster parent. My first son, Dylan was only three months old when I received him. Today, he is 15 and is joined by Hunter, Kenny, and Malaysia. In between I provided either foster or respite care to more children than I can count! The excellent training at James City County, Family First of VA, Newport News Department of Human Services and my own independent study prepared me for therapeutic foster care. I've learned that childhood trauma looks like special needs at times. I teach my children that it is not their fault they are in foster care, and I am there for them and do my best to connect with their culture and biological families while providing for their physical and psychological needs.

Years ago, and as a single mom, I was searching for strong positive role models for my boys and could not find any. Today through CASA's Mentoring Program, each of my children has had a mentor. It was ideal! Melissa from the Mentoring Program worked hard to find a perfect match for each child. I have a lot of kids in my house, now each child receives one-on-one time where they feel special. The volunteers have been so loving and giving of their time. The kids love it! The mentors come to my house, pick up their child, and take them out into the community where they are exposed to new things. They encourage their passions, whether it is bicycling, science, or nature. Each of the boys ended up with male mentors, and they have thrived. They talk about hunting, crops, sports, things I know nothing at all about.

A perfect example is the mentor working with my son Dylan. He is brilliant, as is my son. They talk about sports, vegetation that attracts specific animals, and the pH balance of the soil. I would have never thought to expose him to any of those things. Dylan is like a magnet, a sponge to this gentleman. They plan outings usually once a week. It has been so interesting to also see how the mentor has adapted to my son's love of fishing, baits, and currents. He learns from Dylan too. It has given Dylan a father/grandfather figure, a person he confides in. They laugh and joke. I think it has done great things for them both.

Meanwhile, my son Kenny was matched with a young man from William and Mary's athletic department. His mentor comes by twice a week and has taught Kenny about weightlifting, healthy eating, and body building. He gives Kenny something positive to focus on because it takes a long time to get over the grief and loss of losing your family. They go to the grocery store together and shop for healthy foods. My son joined his high school wrestling team. The night of the awards

ceremony, it was his mentor he wanted to share the evening with. His mentor was so proud. He said he was an only child who wanted siblings and now he has found a younger brother in Kenny.

A strong, female role model stepped up to be Malaysia's mentor. She is in the military and about to be deployed to Germany for six months. While Malaysia might receive a new mentor, she will maintain contact with her mentor through email and Zoom meetings. She will be exposed to the German lifestyle and culture.

You know, I am just as proud of the mentors as I am my own children. I can't thank them enough for coming in and helping my children see more than what is in our home. They encourage them to think outside of the box and show them different paths of interest. I believe some of the things the children are being taught will carry with them throughout life.

It's been wonderful. I never dreamed what a difference having a mentor would make. I wish everyone, every age, every situation, could have a mentor.

It's a lengthy process to get a mentor but it is so the match will succeed. You go for an initial interview. The child answers a lot of questions about their likes, dislikes, and the type of person they want. Then Melissa goes through her volunteers and tries to handpick a match. She won't put a child with just anyone, it will be a person that is best suited for the child. So, it may take a little while to find the best person.

I cannot thank the mentors enough because they have really committed themselves. I think the people who have mentored my kids will be lifelong adopted family members.

Our community provides so many services that most people don't even know about that will help every type of family you can think of; foster, biological, adopted, and children of single parents. The community has come forward and helped my kids. If only more people knew about mentoring opportunities...all of our children would be better off.

-Written by Linda Palmer, Colonial CASA Advocate