

The Mentor Connection

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Editor: Lauren Wichterman

A Conversation with Two Mentors

Over the summer, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to interview Ayesha Mahmoud, a mentor in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Yolanda Flores, a mentor in Contra Costa County, California. Much can be learned from the experiences of these two women and their motivation to participate in the Shared Family Care program. Although there are differences between the Contra Costa and Milwaukee programs, Ayesha and Yolanda seem to agree on many things: the importance of keeping families together and helping their mentees become self-sufficient and able to provide for their children, and the desire to make their mentees feel comfortable and safe in their homes. My thanks go out to both of these mentors for sharing their experiences and knowledge with us!

— Lauren Wichterman, Editor



What was the primary reason(s) you became a SFC mentor?

AM: The primary reason I got involved with SFC was because I did not like the foster care system as it was. Children cannot distinguish between good and bad – they love their parents no matter what. I liked that the program was about keeping families together. Regardless of whether the mentee parents decide to keep custody of their children or not, they can still be a major part of their kids' lives.

YF: My reasons for becoming a mentor were two-pronged. I was looking for a way I could bring additional money into my household. I was also looking into an activity I could be involved with that was socially responsible (I wanted to do something for my community).

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What do you think are the most important traits that someone must have in order to be a successful mentor?

AM: I have one of the only successful mentees in this area, and I think that's due in part to the fact that I was a young mom myself. I raised four children to be grown adults. I see the parents in the program as a mirror of myself. I don't try to restrict them from anything – we're dealing with adults. I try to show them another way of life, and to always put their children first. I share my life with them, and give them my opinion; my mentee can make her own choices about what she wants to do. I don't have a curfew or restrictions on the telephone or TV. I try to let her live her life as she would if she were on her own. My only rule is that no drugs or alcohol are allowed. I think it's really important to let my mentee find her own way. I really try to make her feel comfortable. As part of that, I've shared my whole family with her, and am there for her when she falls down.

YF: You have to care about people and the mentee family, and be prepared to make them part of your family. You need to have a sense of humor, too. The most challenging thing for me has been trying to see life from their perspective – you want to be sympathetic, but at the same time you want to steer them into healthy ways of relating, coping and dealing with upsets.

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What is the best way for a mentor to get started with a new mentee family in his/her home?

AM: Before moving in, a mentee should have an opportunity to spend one-on-one time with a mentor without social workers or administrators. She should come over to your house as a guest – that shows them

how you live, and allows the mentee to pick up on certain aspects of your life. She should have the opportunity to observe you in your home environment. Go shopping together, or go out bowling.

YF: My approach has been to give my mentees the opportunity to fit in and feel comfortable. It's not boot camp here. I help them feel like they are in a safe environment, and that I genuinely care about their well-being. I also try to model behavior with their children. I want my mentees to feel that: a) they are wanted here, b) they are safe, and c) we can build rapport and trust.

As a mentor, you can't be phony. After we're comfortable, I will point out opportunities for the mentee to discipline her kids in healthy ways. They have to believe I care – that I'm here to help them, not criticize or belittle them. I take a big sister/mother/caring family member approach, which has been effective for me. Most important is that they feel welcome here, and that they know they can call me any time day or night.

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How can mentors make the mentee family feel at home while still setting appropriate limits?

AM: When my mentee moved into my house, I went out of my way to make her feel comfortable. I let her decorate her area, and we always respected each other as adult women. I tried to flip the script of what she was used to from administrators: I always asked her what she thought, and how she wanted to approach a situation. I always put things back on the mentee. I made sure she was always in charge.

YF: We spend a good amount of time getting to know each other and just talking. I talk about my own experience, having been

a single parent for most of my son's life. I always had support. Everyone needs help and a support system. I think it's important to let your mentee know why you chose to become a SFC mentor.

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What strategies do you use to teach your mentee parenting/life skills?

AM: I use my life to teach my mentee parenting and life skills. I include her in chores, and show her how to do laundry. I let her do the grocery list, and then we go shopping together.

YF: I focus on the moment. After general discussions about what she needs to accomplish for FamiliesFirst – I'll ask her: what do you feel you need to do (e.g. in terms of parenting skills)? Initially, when my mentee moves in, I just observe (don't critique). I try to explain how we'll discipline the kids. I tell her I'm not trying to be critical, but am just helping her identify ways to intervene with her kids. I integrate life skills into what I'm doing with the mentee – like going grocery shopping together.

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How do you handle conflict with your mentee when it arises? Can you give an example?

AM: When there's a problem, I tell my mentee she can't shut down. I tell her that we shouldn't **not** talk about it. We sit down, talk about what's happened, how it affected the family, and how we should resolve it. I ask her how she would have handled the situation differently. Communication and being honest are essential.

YF: I have had very little conflict with my mentees. If conflict arises, we just talk about it. Mentees are often like children, regardless of their age. I want them to learn



Quick and Easy Recipes for Kids

- Hanging out in old neighborhoods and with friends and family members who use
- Having many members of the opposite sex calling and/or coming around more frequently
- Staying out late, missing curfews, and unaccounted-for time
- Keeping secrets – “Please don’t tell my social worker...”
- Denial and refusal to ask for help – “I’m doing fine and I don’t need assistance”

Remember that relapse starts occurring before the drinking or drugging begins.

Article contents taken from the August 8, 2002 Mentor Support Group meeting discussion with guest speakers: Christine Dean, Program Coordinator at The Rectory, Ujima Family Recovery Services; and Tangie Miles, Program Coordinator at New Connections, Concord.

Contents also excerpted from: The Living Center website at <http://www.tlctx.com>. The article title is called “Mistaken Beliefs about Relapse” written by Terry Gorksi and Lee Jamison.

Berry Lemonade Slush

1 (20 oz) package Country Time Lemonade Flavor Drink Mix
 1/2 cup of water
 3 cups of ice cubes
 1 cup of fresh or frozen blueberries or strawberry halves

Measure drink mix into cap just to 1 quart line. Place drink mix, water, ice and fruit into blender container; cover. Blend on high speed about 10 seconds. Turn off blender. Mix with spoon; cover. Blend about 5 seconds or until smooth. Serve immediately. Store leftover slush in freezer.

Makes 7 servings.

Ants on a Log

5 stalks of celery
 1/2 cup of peanut butter
 1/4 cup of raisins

Cut the celery stalks in half. Spread with peanut butter. Sprinkle with raisins.

Makes 5 servings.

The SFC staff from Contra Costa County submitted these recipes.

Contra Costa Shared Family Care Training Dates and Topics

East/Central County Mentor Support Group

Topic: Recognizing and Coping with Depression
 Date: November 14, 2002
 Time: 6:30–8:30 pm

East/Central County Mentee Support Group

Topic: Money Management
 Date: November 19, 2002
 Time: 6:00–8:00 pm

West County Mentor Support Group

Topic: Recognizing and Coping with Depression
 Date: November 20, 2002
 Time: 6:30–8:30 pm

Holiday Party

FAMILIES WELCOME!

Location: Berkeley Marina Radisson Berkeley, CA
 Date: December 6, 2002
 Time: 5:30–8:00 pm

What You Can Do to Assist Your Mentee with His/Her Recovery Process

- 1** Encourage your mentee to find a sponsor; establish a “home group” (a specific group they regularly attend); and attend recovery support group meetings at least 2-3 nights a week. These meetings are designed to help maintain a sober *lifestyle* and good support systems make it okay to ask for help and assistance.
- 2** Inquire about what the mentee’s day will look like and get a clear idea of her or his daily plans. Accountability is an important step towards self-sufficiency.
- 3** Encourage your mentee to keep a calendar and plan the family’s activities a week in advance. Time management lowers stress.
- 4** Encourage your mentee to express how s/he is feeling through some form of positive self-expression (e.g., art, music, journaling, dance, etc.). Learning to express, control, and understand your own feelings is an important healthy living skill.
- 5** Find out what your mentee loves to do. Help them get involved in what they like doing. When we are good at what we do, we feel better about ourselves.
- 6** Encourage the mentee to make time for herself after her children go to bed.
- 7** Trust your gut. Your intuition may be correct so follow it through.
- 8** Be firm. Although you care about your mentee, you should not be willing to let your feelings interfere with any decisions you must make regarding the well-being of the children in your home.
- 9** Collaborate. Be sure to establish relationships with all the positive people involved in the mentee’s life. Work as a team to help the mentee move towards her or his goals.
- 10** Have patience. Remember that many of the self-defeating behaviors mentees exhibit (e.g., lying, denial, manipulation, etc.) are methods that they have used to survive, cope, and protect themselves from the trauma they have experienced.
- 11** Be yourself. Let your mentee see how you cope with the ups and downs of life. You may very well be showing your mentee new ways to approach life.
- 12** Be open-minded. Create an environment that allows the mentee to be honest and share her/his feelings without making the mentee a “bad” person.
- 13** Make time to get to know your mentee. Share meal times, and find activities that you can do together.

Red flags that indicate sobriety may be losing priority...

- Not planning ahead for daily and weekly activities
- Sleeping all day, lack of sleep, nightmares
- Not spending quality time with their children (no down time to engage in one-on-one or family activities with children)
- Isolation and avoidance
- Poor nutrition
- Emotional numbness
- Memory problems, mental confusion
- Impulsive behavior
- Overreacting, getting angry, or feeling unusually anxious about small things
- Not attending recovery support group meetings
- Sudden behavior changes (overly talkative when normally quiet, tolerance levels are low, etc.)

what they need to learn because it's their responsibility, not because I remind them. I have had no angry encounters with my mentees. I have had more conflict with the children (who sometimes see the mentor as an interloper). In these cases, I have asserted my power and it's always worked out fine. My mentee knows it's not mean-spirited: she supports me and I support her.

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Could you comment on the ways you work with CPS and the SFC staff? What is this collaboration like?

AM: In Milwaukee, we have a team of people that work with the mentees: the Director of the program, the mentee's social worker, and the mentor. We all meet at least once a week. We strategize about the direction the mentee is going in, and talk about how the mentor and mentee are feeling. We discuss everything that is pertinent to the mentee's progress and improvement in her lifestyle. This meeting is very important. My collaboration with SFC staff and the CPS social worker allows us to back each other up. I always have an open door policy for staff.

YF: I have good relationships with FamiliesFirst staff, especially the social workers and housing coordinator. Having had three mentees, I know the staff pretty well and have strong relationships with them. My interactions with CPS vary because we have a different worker each time. It really depends on the workers' personal style and personality. With the CPS worker, I try to be the mentees' advocate and liaison – I try to bridge the communication gap between my mentee and the worker.

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How have you supported your mentees to make positive changes in their lives?

AM: I have encouraged my mentee to go after her dream to be a dietician/cook. She is now enrolled in college to do just that. I take her around and introduce her to people her own age who have kids and are going to college and making it. Doing this allows her to see their homes, see that they don't have husbands yet are still succeeding. This shows her that she can always do better.

YF: I have helped them realize how they can do things differently (e.g., respond to crisis). Many of the mentees have a large

problem in that they can't communicate their anger or fear, and often have low self-esteem. There are very positive things about them. I try as much as possible to say encouraging things to them – to make sure these positive qualities are acknowledged.

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What is your current relationship with your past mentees?

AM: This is my first mentee.

YF: My first mentee and I are still emotionally close. I hope to occasionally baby-sit her kids, so she and her husband can have time alone together. I care deeply for her

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6 Ways to be a Better Mentor

Here are six ways that you can become a better mentor. As you read the list, ask yourself how often you do these things with your mentee . . .

- 1** Be positive – find a strength/positive quality in your mentee.
- 2** Listen, listen, listen.
- 3** Let the small things go – in other words, choose your battles.
- 4** Practice patience.
- 5** Understand the mentor's role – keep good boundaries.
- 6** Role model respect and honesty.

Regina Ginyard, Michael Greer, Gloria Ross and Kathy Carr of the Contra Costa SFC Program submitted this list.

Mentor Teleconference

on the Needs of Mentors, Mentees and Their Children



PARTICIPANTS

MILWAUKEE

Mentors: Helen Pfeifer

Staff: Rebecca Jacobi
Karin Frederick (Facilitator)

CONTRA COSTA

Mentors: Janice Gray
LaRonna Graham
Lisa Pittman
Gwendolyn Bridges
Frieda Adamson-Hughes
Crystal Butler

Staff: Kathy Carr
Regina Ginyard
Saundra Marshall
Gloria Ross

On Wednesday, September 18, 2002, six Contra Costa County mentors and one mentor from Milwaukee, Wisconsin joined each other via teleconference for a discussion on “Identifying and Addressing the Distinct Needs of Mentors, Mentees and Their Children.” SFC staff members from both programs were also present. Karin Frederick, Licensing Social Worker from Milwaukee, started by inviting mentors to share their experiences and perceptions of the needs of mentors, mentees and their children.

A Contra Costa mentor initiated the discussion by emphasizing the need for mentees to have time to bond with their children, which they don’t have if they are working 12-hour shifts. For this reason, the Milwaukee program does not have a work requirement, thus allowing mentees to focus on parenting and therapeutic issues. At the same time, several mentors noted the importance of structure, which can come from the mentor and program as well as from a regular work schedule.

One mentor noted that, although each mentee is different, the program is a little too short unless mentees are extremely motivated. Another mentor observed that older mentees tend to be more motivated and more determined to reach their goals, and that younger mentees seem to be more in denial.

One mentor cited the fact that she was straightforward with her mentee from the beginning as part of the reason the

placement worked out so well. Someone else mentioned that it is very important that the mentee does not feel inferior, and that respect between mentor and mentee is crucial. Another Contra Costa mentor described her process for interviewing potential mentees to get a sense of “where their mind is” and how motivated they are to change. During the interview, she allows there to be moments of silence, which people then invariably fill. In this way, she is able to get a sense of what people are “really” thinking. She believes it is better to be more selective and to do more and better screening at the beginning, than to be unhappy with the match later on. One person from Milwaukee mentioned that their SFC program does trial runs. Thus, in order to get five families into the program, Milwaukee staff had to screen 47 families.

There was a brief discussion about incentives and consequences related to following house rules. One person brought up the fact that the only real consequence that mentees have in the SFC program is termination.

Karen continued the discussion by asking the group how they take care of themselves. One Contra Costa mentor said that she made sure she kept her personal structure and interests when her mentee moved in. She also goes on small vacations, making sure that she does not drastically change the way she lives. Another Contra Costa mentor said that she tries to be honest and upfront, and goes to meetings to

Teaching Life Skills:

Some Concrete Items for Mentors to Cover with Their Mentees

connect with other mentors. Another person said that she takes care of herself by working out, going to church, and inviting her mentee to participate in her activities. Having grown up in a large family, she says she is used to an environment in which there are lots of people – thus having a mentee has not been a big transition for her. Because she's not a big promoter of TV, she has suggested to her mentee that she read to her baby instead.

Karen then asked the group how SFC workers could better support mentors. One Contra Costa mentor answered by saying that, in her experience, workers are very positive, and that the meetings she has with her mentee and the SFC staff member are like "party time." Another mentor agreed and said that there was good consistency among the workers: they are available, very supportive, and the mentor meetings they host are great.

One Contra Costa mentor asked the other mentors how they explain their role to their mentees. She said she feels as if mentees don't really understand why she's there. One person responded by saying if the mentee is motivated, she will see her mentor as aiding her in realizing her goals.

The teleconference lasted for 90 minutes and proved to be a good forum for mentors to learn about each other's experiences and to support one another.



BUDGETING:

A mentor can sit with a mentee and:

- Clear all outstanding bills.
- Establish a payment plan (i.e., monthly/weekly premium payments), and set a timeline for bills to be paid in full.
- Look at all incoming funds.
- Look at the possibility of receiving funds (e.g., disability, state, or child-care reimbursements; employment earnings; child support; etc.).
- Assist mentee with budgeting her existing funds so she can pay monthly bills, and establish a remaining balance of funds to pay for other expenses that may come up during the month.
- Learn to work with remaining money after bills are paid.
- If mentee has credit cards, give account to a Consumer Credit Counseling Organization to handle the account and they will make sure credit card companies do not charge any more interest while the balance is being paid off.

SHOPPING:

- Prior to going to the store, have mentee make a list of needed items based on a weekly menu, and encourage her to purchase only those items on the list.
- Use coupons.
- Look at sale items and estimate the savings from full price to sale price.

- Look at nutritional value of items, e.g., canned foods with preservatives, fresh foods (the amount of time one can store these foods), processed foods and their nutritional value, etc.



COOKING:

- Teach mentees how to prepare meals beforehand and store in containers for heating during the week.
- Teach mentee how to clean and prepare meals (freshness, choice of cuts, fatty meats, smell, etc.).
- Discuss how to prepare vegetables (steamed, broiled, boiled).
- Explain how to prepare fish and poultry (baked, steamed, cooked on stove), and to avoid frying foods as much as possible.
- Go over place settings (mats, napkins, plates, cups, silverware).



CLEANING:

- Show mentees how to prepare laundry, wash clothes, purchase detergent, fabric softener, etc.
- Demonstrate how to clean various rooms in the house.
- Discuss proper disposal of cleaning products (e.g., bleach, ammonia, etc.).

This article was submitted by C. Michael Greer, Social Worker at Contra Costa's SFC Program.



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and her kids, and will continue to play a role in their lives. I expect that my third mentee and I will be life-long friends, and will maintain an ongoing relationship. I will be in the lives of my mentees and their kids as long as they want me to be.

What has been the biggest challenge of being a mentor? How have you overcome that?

AM: The biggest challenge of being a mentor for SFC has been financial. When mentees come into the program, they have nothing. I found it hard not to supply them with some basic necessities, because it takes them a while to get financially stable. Some of the moms were homeless before entering the program, so they have a lot of material needs. Kids don't have as many material needs because they were in foster care before coming to SFC. I ended up taking my mentee to the clothing bank so she could pick up some clothes for herself. I also helped her get some small, odd jobs until she found a regular job.

YF: Being a mentor has opened up my worldview. It is hard for me to truly understand what my mentees have been through. I'm very child-focused – so sometimes that makes it hard for me to understand what they've been through. I try not to be judgmental; I accept them for who they are when they come into my house. I don't focus on their past behavior. I appreciate

how far they've come to get to this point. The hardest part of being a mentor is trying to accept without being judgmental of past behaviors.

Why do you continue being a mentor for SFC? What do you get out of it?

AM: I get a feeling of success in knowing that when a family leaves my house, the mentee will be able to be positive, raise her kids, and contribute to society. My family and I will always be there for my mentee and her kids. I am happy that I kept a family together, and I'd do it again in a heartbeat.

YF: I continue with the program because I get a lot out of it. I become emotionally attached to these young women. They become part of my family. I get a lot of satisfaction out of them getting their own place and reuniting with their family. I want their reunification to be forever, and for them to no longer be CPS-involved. I want my mentees to move forward, and to stand on their own two feet without male dependence so they can be the parents their children deserve. It's important that they make good decisions about possible partners. If there's one thing I want them to learn from me, it's always to ask themselves: is this the best thing for my kids? If they can say yes, then that's a very easy way they can make sure they're making a good decision.

Is there anything you would change about the program? If so, what?

AM: Here in Wisconsin there is talk about phasing the program out. I believe SFC is the wave of the future, and the program should be given a chance. If one were to look at the statistics, so many bad things

happen to children in foster care. If you look in your prisons, many of the inmates never had family and support. It is more important to keep families together than to send them from one institution to another. I hope that the "higher-ups" recognize the value of the program, which is in keeping moms with their kids.

I also think that the program should give moms getting out of prison a chance. So many people need this program – they should open it up a bit.

YF: I would change a couple of things about SFC. Some people would benefit from more time in the program (e.g., an additional 3 months). The first three months you spend building trust and consistency. At 6 months, some people are just not there yet, and need a little more time.

Mentors end up spending money on the mentee family, especially if there's more than 1 child (for placements with more than one child, SFC payments should be raised from \$1200 to \$1500). I've invested a lot of money to prepare my house for having a mentee: I bought twin beds, got a toddler bed, furniture, etc.

In addition, the SFC program is not good at keeping an inflow of mentees coming into the program. Now that my third mentee has left, my house is empty and will be for a couple of months. Yet I know that there are people out there who need a place like mine. This issue needs to be addressed – a mechanism needs to be put in place to keep people coming into the program.

If you would like to tell your story, contribute a recipe, or have an idea for an article, please call Lauren at (510) 643-8837, or email her at wichter@hotmail.com