

I had seen the Children's Aid Society of Mercer County's Facebook posts for months, if not years, asking for mentors. Asking for caring adults to volunteer a small chunk of time to create a support system for children and teens who don't have anyone else. Or have dysfunctional family networks. Or teens about to age out of a system that could not possibly begin to prepare them for all the things they needed to know and understand about being an independent adult in this world without a safety net.

And every time a little voice in my head said, "these kids need you - maybe you can help". And every time I heard the voice, I shut it down. I was never "ready" to volunteer - there were always 700 reasons I could not possibly do it. Even though I had spent most of my marriage talking about fostering and/or adopting after our kids were old enough. Even though my background was literally in Education. Even though the majority of my career was spent working with children with a variety of diagnoses, from a wide range of family dynamics and economic situations. Even though I was trained and licensed to work as a Behavior Specialist. It was literally my area of expertise. And I still didn't think I was ready. I thought I needed my kids to be older. Or to be all the way through my divorce. Or to be fully settled into my new forever home.

And then after one post, I just said screw it - I'm never going to be ready - it's never going to be the perfect time. It's time now. And I sent an email to Cari.

From there, the process was relatively easy and painless. Clearances, training, meetings to discuss different children in a variety of ugly situations that just need a person - ONE person - who's got their back.

The "requirements" or expectations of how often you meet with the kiddo you match with were nothing like I expected. Hanging out with her for a few hours at least once a month. Fielding phone calls a couple of times a week for around 10 minutes. And the realization hits that she just wants someone to care. She just wants someone to answer the phone and ask her how her day was. How is school? How are you feeling? What did

you have for dinner today? What do you feel like doing when I come grab you next time? That's it.

And now I'm kicking myself for not starting sooner. I mean, it's still very new, very early in our relationship, and we are still testing boundaries and building rapport. And man, the first time I took her out - at the end she cried and begged me not to take her back to the group home. That was rough. My momma heart broke.

But I kept reminding myself that this is new for her, too. She got her first taste of being out without staff for the first time in 4 years. And really, she just needs consistency. Not wanting to go back is just as much fear that I won't come back, and she'll never see me again, as much as it is her frustration for being in this place. This place that she is forced to stay in by no choice of her own. She just wants a family of her own. A place to call home. So, I'll deal with the tears, and the rage, and the feelings that she, as a minor, is stuck in a situation not of her making that is completely out of her control. And I'll keep showing up. I'll keep taking her out and dealing with the behaviors and the hard parts, because she deserves that. She deserves someone who isn't scared of the hard parts. Someone who wants to be there for the fun AND the fire. Until she learns to begin to trust again.

So, it's not easy....but no relationship worth having is. And this is another relationship that will take work, commitment, and loyalty. And while I am just starting to see the work that it's going to take at times, I also see that it's such a small amount of my time, my life, my energy. And I can do that. I can be all in for what time I am able to commit to. No one has asked me to adopt her, spend every waking moment with her, or be her everything. And the support from Cari has been amazing. If I ever feel overwhelmed or frustrated, I can always call Cari to vent or brainstorm.

Overall, it's less time than I've committed to any of my children's activities - travel baseball has asked for a lot more of my time and money. Dance....Taekwondo. I can't get over how

little I'm being asked for - but the impact has such big implications in this child's life. She has ME now - she has someone. And I am truly honored and privileged to get to be that person for her.

Tonight, as we ended our phone conversation, she told her group home staff in the background that her "worker" was coming to get her this weekend to take her to the zoo. I said, "What worker?" She said, "You silly!" I immediately corrected her - "I'm not your worker, honey, I don't get paid to spend time with you. I do it for free - because I want to - because I like you. Because you are important to me".

Because she deserves to have someone in her life who chooses her, even with all of her baggage. And I'll keep reminding her of that until she doesn't need to be told it anymore.

-Current Mentor