



Mentoring At-Risk Kids Gives Hope

By Barbara J. Elliott

UBA member congregation Jersey Village Baptist is one of the newest Houston affiliates with Kids Hope, coming on line last fall. Pastor Ed Hogan (left) serves as the prayer partner for mentor Sandi Rodriguez, one of the mentors committed to Post Elementary. Hogan sees Kids Hope as one way to equip the faithful to take their faith out of the pew.

"I am very intentional in our becoming more community oriented, and Kids Hope is one of the more tangible ways we can get into the community," says Dr. Hogan. "We want to be a prototype and get every church to adopt a school near them. "

Mary Ruth Razmandi, school counselor at Post Elementary says, "The program is absolutely wonderful. The Jersey Village mentors have not missed a beat since they started and their dedication has been phenomenal." The church has also provided shoes and backpacks for the children at Post. "But Kids Hope is so much more than a sporadic effort of giving things," Ed Hogan contends. "It's a weekly reminder that we are committed to these children on an ongoing basis."

While Jersey Village is one of the most recent churches to commit to Kids Hope, another UBA congregation, Lazybrook Baptist Church, is one of the oldest, having begun in 1999 to place mentors in the schools. John Neesley, the pastor, has himself been a mentor for those ten years.

"Hey R., when I came to mentor you last week you weren't here. What happened?" asked Neesley during one visit to Sinclair Elementary School where Lazybrook provides a team of mentors through Kids Hope USA. "My mom got put in jail for stealing," the second-grade boy said. "I had to go stay with my grandmother, and she didn't bring me to school."

"It really got to me," said Neesley. "Here's a little boy whose world is in disarray. His mom's in jail, dad's in another country and I'm the closest thing he has to a father figure." For one hour a week, he gets John's undivided attention. When John asked R. to write a sentence later that week, he scrawled the words, "I like it when Pastor John comes to see me at school."

Kids Hope USA is an award-winning ministry model building partnerships for churches for the past 14 years, now equipping congregations in 28 states that provide more than 7,000 mentors for at-risk children. The Points of Light Foundation calls Kids Hope "the premier paradigm of faith-based mentoring in the nation."

It's a one-on-one strategy. One church congregation adopts one public elementary school, and one mentor commits to one child for one hour a week. Each mentor meets at the school with a child selected by the school, beginning usually in first or second grade. Many come from single-parent homes, most live in poverty. If a mentor can intervene early enough to stabilize a child's acute emotional needs, the child's ability to learn almost always follows. According to research of the Frost Research Center evaluations by teachers and principals, 99% of the children benefitted from KHUSA mentoring last year.

Kids Hope quickens the pulse of the congregation by providing a vehicle for members to engage in authentic relationships with families in need. John Neesley watched the growing

effect of a Lazybrook mentor's presence on the mother of a little boy in the neighborhood. When the common law husband of the single mom moved out, he left a gaping hole in her boy's life and her own. The mother decided the most positive thing her son had was his male mentor, and for the sake of her son began to go to Lazybrook Baptist. "She developed a relationship with the ladies here, later was baptized, and became an active member," John recalls. "It was the natural overflow of a very positive mentor relationship."

Schools welcome Kids Hope USA with open arms. Lawrence Allen in HISD Strategic Partnerships affirms, "We are waiting eagerly for mentors to come into the schools." "They love it," says Ginger Corrigan, Lazybrook's Director (shown at right with Neesley). "They see the great needs of the children and are very interested and enthusiastic." The school secretary, Teresa Billingsly, works hand-in-hand with Ginger to let needs be known, like when a child can't afford clothes and supplies, and the church steps up to take them shopping.



All Kids Hope Directors receive intensive training from the national KHUSA office to equip them for recruiting and training mentors in their own congregations. Melanie Ramos brings bilingual and bicultural skills to her role as Jersey Village's KHUSA Director, while partnering with Buckner Child and Family Services. "It's very rewarding," says Ginger Corrigan, who has been Lazybrook's director for 6 years. "You look back and you can see what a profound difference mentors make in the lives of children."

"These kids' hearts are like an overdrawn bank account," says Virgil Gulker, founder of Kids Hope USA. "What they need is a deposit of love." Mentoring can make all the difference for a generation of kids in Houston's public schools, half of whom will not graduate. Whether they can read by the end of the second grade determines their likelihood of success – maybe for a lifetime.



The next Kids Hope Director's Training in Houston will be July 12-14. For more information contact Barbara J. Elliott at bellott@centerforrenewal.org and visit www.kidshopeusa.org.