

# Guiding the Next Generation

By Nora K. Wallace

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It doesn't matter much to a group of valley adults that this is National Mentoring Month. For them, such a celebration seems redundant. The group, called Valley Community Mentoring, has been partnering with children for the past decade or so, under the auspices of the Santa Ynez Valley Presbyterian Church. The program is meant as a way to provide role models and friends for children who might need an added adult in their lives. Some of the children come from divorced families or single parent homes; others have deeper family issues and some just need a guiding hand. The program began as an offshoot of the church's men's ministry program, explained John Crowell. Though a father of five himself, Mr. Crowell knew that there were young people in the valley who could benefit from a little added attention. Since then, he and his wife, Lana, have guided about seven young boys. "They saw our lifestyle, and we created some sort of a balance," Mr. Crowell explained. "They could compare, and we saw they all wanted to be successful, whatever that may be." The mentors group often works closely with the staff of Valley Community Counseling, which helped initially to suggest potential participants. The counselors still provide expertise and referrals to the mentors when needed. Though it initially started off with just a few youngsters, the group of youth participants has grown to about 15 children, with the ongoing need for more adult mentors, explained Lola Fikes, who coordinates the program. There are still a few children who have not been linked with an adult. "There are always kids wanting," said Mrs. Fikes, who is aided in administrative duties by Barbara O'Grady. The mentors in the program sign-up to spend just a hour or so a week on a regular basis with a young person. They may go to lunch, or do chores together, play tennis, or just hang out. "We are nothing more than a friend," Mrs. Fikes said. "We need to be their cheerleaders. It's someone there for them and to help get them through" any potential tough spots. About four times a year, all the mentors and young people get together for group activities, such as pumpkin carving or fishing excursions. Parents or guardians are also invited. The mentors meet more regularly, to hear discussions from counselors, or hash out problems they might be experiencing. Santa Ynez artist Marilyn Simandle is a mentor to two teenage girls, including one young woman from an extremely troubled home situation and another who had drug problems. "This is more of a heart thing than anything else," Ms. Simandle said. "I said, 'I have got to do this. My son is grown, my life is full. This is payback time; this is eternal work. This has more meaning than what I do for a living. This is putting time into a life. Who knows what difference that might make?'" With one girl, Ms. Simandle taught her how to sew, and did "girl stuff" like shopping and talking. The other girl was interested in art, and Mrs. Simandle started teaching her how to draw. "We were spending time, an hour at a time, and it got to be four or five hours," she said. "You don't have to have any skills. All you have to do is have a heart. You're not there to be a parent or counselor. You just come alongside them and tell them you believe in them." Offering such guidance was a concept that called to Olympic medalist Charlotte Bredahl-Baker. Called by Mrs. Fikes with a proposal to mentor, she began spending time with two brothers in January 2000, and has added a young girl to the mix as well. "I've always loved to be involved with kids," said Mrs. Bredahl-Baker, who was part of the Bronze medal winning equestrian dressage team in the 1992 Olympics. "I find that with our lifestyle, we have a lot to offer, with the horse ranch, tennis court. We can do a lot of stuff. I've always felt for some kids that it would be a really good opportunity." Mrs. Bredahl-Baker, a real estate agent, takes her charges to various horse events, signs them up for swimming lessons and recreation camps, and plays tennis with them. They are fully integrated into the life she has with her husband, Joel and son, Zach, a 16-year-old for whom the couple are guardians. The young girl she mentors, Chelsea, lost her parents, and is being raised by grandparents. The two boys, 11-year-old



Charlotte Bredahl-Baker, who volunteers with Valley Community Mentoring, helps kids grow up with the companionship of an adult. The Briceno brothers, Nick and Andy, spend time at their mentor's Buelton ranch.

Nick and 13-year-old Andy, are from a divorced family whose mother and father both want them to be involved. "It's good," said Andy Briceno, a 7th grader at Santa Ynez Valley Elementary School. "It's someone to talk to beside our parents." The boys both like the activities they can partake in at Mrs. Bredahl-Baker's expansive Buellton horse ranch, including tennis playing, jumping on a trampoline or riding go-carts. "I like it because sometimes when we're bored at our house we can go to Charlotte's and do stuff," Nick said. For the boys' mother, Julie, having Ms. Bredahl-Baker in her sons' lives has been a perfect compliment to the attention they get from her and their father. "If there ever was a fairy godmother, it's Charlotte," Ms. Briceno said. "She's an angel. They love it. She makes an effort to always have their benefit in mind. It's a blessing." Ms. Briceno doesn't feel the mentor is taking her place, nor does Mrs. Bredahl-Baker want that. "This is what I love? Æ you get to be the good guy all the time," Mrs. Bredahl-Baker said. "It's much easier than being a parent." Ms. Briceno, a single mother who has moved the boys five times in five years, said she appreciates the opportunities Mrs. Bredahl-Baker can provide. "It's a wonderful, wonderful program," she said. "She's always very, very respectful of your time and what would work for them." The relationship works for the mentor as well. "I think it can be incredibly rewarding," Mrs. Bredahl-Baker said. "Once in while, they'll say something and it makes it all worth it." In his years of being a mentor, Mr. Crowell's own family incorporated the young charged into their family life. He taught his mentees how to drive and helped them get jobs. He got them raking leaves at the church or played baseball. One young man from a troubled family was initially very shy, Mr. Crowell recalled. "It took a long time to develop confidence for him that the program could be something he could enjoy and benefit from as opposed to being a threat," Mr. Crowell said. The young man is 21 now, and recently joined the Marine Corps. The Crowells saw him at a holiday church service. "He gave us a huge hug," Mr. Crowell said. "He told us how much he loved us. It felt great. It was very rewarding to have that kind of satisfaction; it did work." Mrs. Fikes' husband, Bob, a retired teacher, is now mentoring two brothers. He helps one of the boys build science fair projects, and instructs them about manners. They even built a loft bed for the older boy's room. They talk about money, about right and wrong and about the future. There's no requirement for a time limit on the mentoring relationship, but Mrs. Fikes said they want mentors to consider at least a year. "It takes a year for friendships to blossom," she said. "That's what we're after, friendships." Though the girls she mentors are both now 18, Ms. Simandle remains in contact with them. One is attending college, the other is drifting back on a bad path, she said. "Every single person has an hour a week," Ms. Simandle said. "Everyone can be a mentor. It doesn't require any skill. And it can make such a difference in their lives."

FYI: For information on the mentoring program, call Lola Fikes at 688-5147. Mentors must undergo law enforcement background checks.



Charlotte Bredahl-Baker has been mentoring for six years. At top, she stands with Chelsea Maler and Nick Briceno. Center photo, Rich Fisher, left, and his mentoring pal Gabe, made crosses last year for Good Friday, while, above, a young Sara shows off her catch at a mentor gathering last year.



Mentor Bob Fikes, at top, peruses one of the hefty binders each mentor in the program receives. Above, Bob and Lola Fikes, and Barbara O'Grady, are instrumental in keeping the Valley Community Mentoring Program running.