

# THEY'LL HAVE YOU AT HELLO

*Oregon business leaders connect with youth through mentoring programs*

BY ALAINA BULLER



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- Ostberg

**WHEN KARYN MIELOSZYK, OWNER** of Smart Business Consulting in Klamath Falls, decided to volunteer, she thought planting vegetables and pulling weeds at a community garden would be right up her alley. Imagine her surprise when the small gardening project quickly turned into nurturing the life of a young child.

The woman in charge of the gardens introduced Mieloszyk to the Kids in the Middle mentoring program, part of Citizens for Safe School in Klamath County. Mieloszyk was apprehensive, to say the least. But being able to choose a child to work with appealed to her, and she figured the one-hour-per-week requirement would fit into her schedule.

"I sat down, literally looked in a book and thought, this is not going to be a good thing. They were all girly girls, and I'm not much of a girly girl person," she says. "But I found a girl who said she liked animals and she wanted to improve her life. I didn't look any further." Mieloszyk has been with her match, Jamie, since April 2006.

There are a lot of excuses not to mentor: I travel too much. I don't know if I can relate to a child. I have my own children to care for. And the biggie — I'm just too busy.

But every mentor will say that the biggest reason to volunteer — making a significant impact in a child's life — far outweighs any initial doubts. Oregon Mentors, a nonprofit organization that is a resource for mentoring programs, says more than 100,000 young people in Oregon still need a mentor. And more than 100 unique programs throughout the state offer plenty of opportunities to get involved.

"It can be a challenge, for sure, to get people to mentor. I think initially it seems like such a time commitment, and it is," says Christina Snavely, Oregon Mentors grants and publications manager. "What we try to do is explain the ability to fold a child into the many activities that people already do. It really can be as simple as if you watch movies or if you go to museums or parks or play sports — those are activities youth like to do as well."

## David Ostberg and Cay'man

David Ostberg, who volunteers for Mentor Portland, realized after the first few outings with his match, Cay'man, that the amount of time spent with a child is less important than the frequency and quality of the visits.

Their three-minute ride on the Portland Aerial Tram proved that. The shared experience turned out to be an important moment in their relationship. Ostberg says 8-year-old Cay'man is a funny, charismatic, energetic little guy. "I can't emphasize how much energy he has," he says. But when Ostberg suggested riding the tram, Cay'man was visibly nervous. Cay'man's family said he would never do it, that his fear of heights would get the best of him.

"When I told him about the tram ... he was quiet for a few minutes, which is very unusual. He said, 'Well, as long as I'm with you,

I know I'm going to be safe,'" Ostberg says. "He really wanted to be able to go back and tell his family that he did it. So you could really see him working through it."

As the tram passed over the support tower, Cay'man seemed tense, Ostberg says, but a few moments later when the gondola settled, Cay'man's expression changed. His face exuded bravery, and he looked as if nothing could faze him.

"When we first started hanging out, I felt like everything we did had to be this big, fun event, but that creates a lot of stress and sometimes it's hard to make time to do those big things," he says. "So I've gotten a lot more comfortable doing low key things. And we've had some good conversations when we just go out for ice cream or when we go out to dinner on a Wednesday night."

Ostberg recently took on the role of vice president of selection science with a new company, Hirexperience Inc., in San Francisco. Though the company asked him to move to California full-time right

away, Ostberg was not ready to make that transition for many reasons, including his relationship with Cay'man. "I talked with the founders and, especially when they heard about my mentor role with Cay'man, they were really supportive. It was really important to me to come back and spend a couple weeks in Portland as opposed to just giving this up and letting that responsibility fall by the wayside."

Ostberg has spoken to Cay'man about his new job. And since he traveled so much in his previous position, he doesn't think Cay'man will even notice a difference. Ostberg still intends to keep his commitment of the 6-8 hours per month required by Mentor Portland.

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- Bergby

A new workplace trend is giving employees time off to volunteer — and in the case of Umpqua Bank, *paid* time off. Umpqua's Connect Volunteer Network gives employees 40 hours per year of paid time off to volunteer at any approved program that benefits youth or community development.

The program, which began in 2004, boasts huge volunteer numbers each year. In 2007, 1,200 employees volunteered 22,125 hours. Nearly 70 percent of their employees are participating in the program. And a large number of those who participate choose to mentor, including the 2007 winner of the Umpqua Bank Volunteer of the Year Award, Garrett Bergby.

*Fortune* magazine recently ranked Umpqua Bank number 13 on the list of "100 Best Companies to Work For." The main benefit *Fortune* noted was the Connect program. "It's very important for us to invest in youth to give them the opportunity to thrive, to become all that they can be," says Nicole Stein. "I think schools are very much the fabric of every community. It's important for us to allow our employees to be a part of that community."

## Garrett Bergby and Scooter

Garrett Bergby, lead universal associate at Umpqua Bank, has always had a passion for volunteering, which is why he originally became involved with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Oregon. But



COURTESY OF GARRETT BERGBY

Scooter and Garrett Bergby

when it comes to Scooter, his “little,” it’s not about that anymore.

“I told him that the other day,” Bergby says. “I told him, ‘I don’t volunteer with you. You’re my friend. You just happen to be in sixth grade, and you’re younger than me. But I don’t think of it as volunteering; it’s just hanging out as friends.’ And I really truly believe that.”

Early on, Bergby couldn’t seem to get past Scooter’s shy personality. He wondered if the relationship was having any impact. But about four months

later, when Bergby arrived at school, Scooter ran up and greeted him with a bear hug — a first for the match. “I had to wipe away a tear,” Bergby says. “For a kid to do that in front of other kids, his friends ... to express that kind of happiness, and especially for him, I realized I’m really making a difference in his life.”

But with the good times come some challenging moments. Bergby says the biggest struggle for him is to know what topics are approachable and what are not. “At what point do I play a role or could I play a role regarding a situation? I have quite a bit of dialogue with his mom about what’s appropriate to address and what’s not.”

Bergby has not yet had to deal with anything too serious. Though recently, while watching “Transformers” together, the movie alluded to the topic of masturbation. “I’m just thinking, ‘Oh great!’” Bergby says. “I’m sitting there watching him out of the corner of my eye to see how he’s reacting and to see whether I think it’s appropriate to bring it up if I need to. I’m thinking I could bring up almost any topic other than this.” Luckily for Bergby, it didn’t seem necessary to tackle that idea right then.

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Mentoring program populations vary: Mentor Portland works with children who have a parent incarcerated or who are in foster care. Kids in the Middle works with middle school children who are considered potentially at risk. Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) works with children ages 6-15 in a broader range of situations.

But one thing these children have in common: They all need a positive adult role model. “These kids are on the fence of making some pretty important decisions in life, and it’s our goal to find and train mentors who can step in and help guide these kids in the right direction,” says Mark Wilke, director of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Oregon.

BBBS, the oldest and largest mentoring program in the U.S., has been in existence for 104 years. With the support of their national office, BBBS of Central Oregon is able to get the word out and recruit on a larger scale. They currently support 550 matches. “But if you really think about how many kids who are in our service area and who could benefit, we’re really just scraping the surface,” Wilke says. “We would like to at least reach 600 by the end of this year.”

Most children who are referred for mentoring, says Debbie

Vought, executive director of Kids in the Middle, are experiencing challenges that may send them on a course toward school failure, not getting along with peers, abusing substances, etc. “They have not yet done these things, like penetrating the justice system or using drugs, but because they are in the middle of some challenging life circumstances, they may make bad choices without proper support from responsible adults.”

## Bob Longo and Andy

Bob Longo, executive vice president of Desert Lake Technologies in Klamath Falls, could be considered for sainthood. Longo is not your typical mentor, but he certainly knows the strong impact a responsible adult can have on a child’s life.

Longo began his mentoring with Big Brothers Big Sisters in New Jersey in 1977. He was 22 and his “little” was 12. Today, he’s 54 and his “little” is 44 and they are the best of friends. But he didn’t stop at just mentoring.

Longo adopted and raised five teenage boys as a single parent beginning in 1981. Now that his boys are older (his last adoption was in 2000 and his youngest are 23-year-old twins), he’s been thinking about adopting again. He was fostering a child recently, and when that didn’t work out, his case worker suggested mentoring.

Though it took him awhile to decide on that path again, he eventually set up a meeting with Kids in the Middle. When Longo met his potential match, Andy, at his school counselor’s office, Andy



COURTESY OF BOB LONGO

Bob Longo and Andy

seemed quiet. Longo took that opportunity to speak frankly. “I said, ‘Andy, I just want you to know I really don’t have time for this. I have a really important job and typically work six to seven days a week and sometimes holidays, and I’m an extremely busy person. Even though I don’t have time for this, I will make the time because I believe this is very important and I take this relationship very seriously.’ I wasn’t sure whether it sunk in.”

Sure enough, soon after Longo left the office, Andy decided he would like to participate. “I just wanted to be direct with him. I wanted him to take it as seriously as a 13-and-a-half-year-old could take it.”

Though Andy is very intelligent, Longo says it isn’t always reflected in his grades. Longo talks to Andy a lot about the value of school and even more so about the value of choosing his friends wisely. “I try to explain to him that he will be judged by the people he hangs out with. He’s a nice kid and he can potentially go far if he can avoid certain pitfalls, and I think his biggest one is he needs to be careful who he’s hanging out with.”

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Consistency is crucial. That message is echoed throughout all the mentoring programs. Vought says research shows that roughly

“During Andrew’s time in foster care, Morgan knew he was the only adult who was a continuous force in Andrew’s life.”



Greg Morgan and Andrew deconstruct a PC at Free Geek.

36 percent of kids who have a mentor for one hour a week over a period of a year will show a significant reduction in their substance use. Fifty-plus percent show improvement in their behavior and the way they get along with peers and family members. And about one-third show improvement in core academic classes. “That’s just an hour a week, and more than that not only means additional social benefits, but the personal satisfaction that both mentors and kids get after having forged a relationship,” she says.

### *Greg Morgan and Andrew*

Greg Morgan worked with mentoring programs in California and he is also a founding board member of Oregon Mentors. But he postponed beginning a one-on-one mentoring relationship for the typical reasons: he traveled a lot, and he wanted to wait until his kids were older. His concerns were abated the moment he began mentoring Andrew in the summer of 2004 through Portland Impact.

“To steal a line from Jerry McGuire, he had me at hello,” Morgan says. “My only regret is that I didn’t start sooner.”

Morgan, the chief technology officer

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And so a lot of times it was trying not to react  
when your natural instinct is to react.”

- Mieloszyk

and director of talent management at Stockamp and Associates Inc., describes his first interaction with Andrew as incredibly easy and incredibly hard, but he says from the beginning they shared a natural interpersonal chemistry. “Our first conversations were about favorite sports, favorite colors, favorite fun things to do, and just as quickly transitioned to ‘My dad went back into prison a few days ago.’ It was just peppered in there in the same tone ... It became apparent to me why having a stable male adult in his life would be a radically different thing than he had ever experienced.”

For three and a half years now, Morgan and Andrew have enjoyed playing Magic cards, reading magazine articles, fishing on the Deschutes, and volunteering at Habitat for Humanity and the Humane Society.

And mixed in with the good times, they’ve had their fair share of concerns along the way. Andrew was in foster care for a year and a half while his mother was dealing with substance abuse problems. During his foster care stay, Andrew, his brother and the biological children of the foster parent snuck into a fireworks stand over the Fourth of July weekend. They didn’t steal anything; the boys were just causing mischief as 12-year-old boys are prone to do. But after they got caught Andrew felt as if he and his brother received harsher treatment than the other children.

“The hard conversation we had to have was, ‘This isn’t fair, Andrew, but you’re being held to a higher standard. There’s a family court judge who’s going to decide whether you get to move back to your mom’s, and this doesn’t help. The family court judge is going to decide whether your mom can handle a 14-year-old boy and a 12-year-old boy on her own.’”

During Andrew’s time in foster care, Morgan knew he was the only adult, other than Andrew’s grandmother, who was a continuous force in Andrew’s life. Other adults who worked with Andrew noticed the dramatic effect the relationship had. “They could threaten him with all kinds of things, but when they said they’d be giving Greg a call, suddenly the behavior changed.”

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Most programs stress the need for mentors to suspend judgment. Many mentors have never experienced the poverty or at-risk lifestyle their matches deal with every day. Kristin Harper, program coordinator for Mentor Portland, says children seldom have the relationship or communication skills adults may be used to. Often times a mentor might plan an activity and the child or his family does

not follow through, or the child may be upset and not know how to express it. It's just a matter of taking the extra time to work through these problems.

Mentors are often paired together based on interests or personalities. Harper says mentors in her program come in a variety of ages, backgrounds and interests. Mentor Portland has mentors from ages 25-65. "It's a very diverse group. A lot of them are definitely working full time and are busy and have jobs that require a bit of them. So it's a pretty open demographic." Harper says all it takes is patience, compassion and a willingness to make that commitment.

## *Karyn Mieloszyk and Jamie*

For Mieloszyk, it was an eye opener to be paired with 8<sup>th</sup>-grader Jamie. "I had zero familiarity with the kind of life this girl had. And so a lot of times it was trying not to react when your natural instinct is to react when something is shared."

Mieloszyk says she considers herself lucky; she and Jamie have formed quite a bond. Jamie is a bright, positive 15-year-old who is firm enough in her own self to know right from wrong. She's been handed a life of unfortunate circumstances, but she's determined to rise above. "It takes a special person to change and to say I do not want to have a trailer park life. That is literally what she said," Mieloszyk says.

Mieloszyk's biggest obstacle is restraining herself from taking care of Jamie too much. She says she told herself early on that she wasn't going to give Jamie money without good reason. So sometimes Jamie helps wash and detail Mieloszyk's car, or she puts labels on a big mailing. Mieloszyk's husband hates to deal with cans and bottles, so Jamie is free to take them if she wants.

"My husband and I have the financial means to take her under our wing, but it just isn't what this is all about. But she knows that if she needs a winter coat ..." Mieloszyk says. She instead tries to provide Jamie with life experiences she may not otherwise have. For her birthday, she took Jamie to Portland to see "Stomp." It was the first time Jamie had stayed at a hotel.

But aside from her monetary involvement, being there for Jamie is even more important. Mieloszyk attended Jamie's 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation because Jamie's mom was not there. She goes to parent-teacher conferences because Jamie's mom does not go. And Jamie knows how to get to Mieloszyk's house if she ever has a problem at home.

"The big thing for me is how does a parent not go to a parent-teacher conference or an 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation? I have no concept of how an uninvolved parent

is, so that piece of it was probably the hardest for me to get used to. It's not how I live my life and it's not how anybody I know lives their life, and yet I think it's probably more the norm than I want to believe."

Mentoring has certainly been a learning experience for Mieloszyk. With all they've shared over the past two years, they are practically family — Mieloszyk's husband calls Jamie her daughter. "As long as she remains the same type of person, there's no doubt in my mind that I'll be involved with her forever."

No one said mentoring was easy. But each and every mentor will say it's worth it. "It's a lot of work," Mieloszyk says, "but it's the best thing I've ever done." □



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