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Program gives Whiz Kids mentors

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In the Kennedy Heights apartment he shares with his single mother and younger sister, 11-year-old Roderick Dallas anxiously awaits the arrival of the man he calls Mr. Bill.

"He's funny. He's old. He's fast," Roderick says. "He's a good swimmer. I can barely keep up with him in a race."

There's a knock at the door. It's Mr. Bill, whose last name is Schroeder.

The tall, gray-haired, 67-year-old white lawyer from suburban Landen will spend much of this day with Roderick, an African-American sixth-grader growing up in a gritty part of an urban neighborhood.

When they met for the first time more than four years ago, "I looked at him and thought, 'I don't know who's more (nervous), him or me, because we come from really different worlds,'" Schroeder says.

The differences don't seem so stark anymore.

"It's been as much of a blessing to me as it has to him, and I'm not sure it isn't more so to me than him."

This is national mentoring month, a way to make known the need for more Mr. Bills to reach out to more Rodericks. But not every mentor and student can forge a bond like theirs.

"It's not just that I'm helping somebody," Schroeder says. "I consider him a friend. It's a pretty deep relationship."

It began in the fall of 2005, after Schroeder heard the nonprofit youth ministry CityCURE make a presentation at Montgomery Community Church, which he attends. A new program called Whiz Kids was being launched. Churches were being encouraged to "adopt" elementary schools and provide literacy tutors.

Schroeder signed up. He met Roderick, then a second-grader, and once a week they gathered with other tutors and students at John P. Parker School in Madisonville.

"During that first year, I could tell little by little that we were building trust," Schroeder says.

Which is just what Whiz Kids hopes for. A tutor age 21 or older who has spent at least six months working with a student can apply to be a mentor. After background checks, the pair can spend time together away from the tutoring site.

Schroeder was the first tutor to become a mentor. "I knew this could work," he says. "I knew we could go places and I could show him things."

During tutoring sessions, they learned of their mutual love of the outdoors. So Schroeder took Roderick fishing. They visited parks. They hiked. They drove to Kentucky's Red River Gorge, and helped stock a stream with rainbow trout.

Other days, they baked cookies, went to church, bathed Schroeder's golden retriever or visited museums. Roderick also learned to swim.

One day, he asked: "How long are we going to keep doing this?"

"What do you mean?" Schroeder said.

"Is it just going to be for the rest of the school year?"

No, Schroeder said. "For the rest of your life, if you want."

Roderick is one of 70 students at John P. Parker School, out of 430, who are matched with a Whiz Kids tutor or mentor.

Principal Kimberly Mack has watched the boy's friendship with Schroeder grow. "It's not just about learning how to read, how to write, how to do mathematics. It's that relationship between an adult and child that makes the child ... want to do more," she says. "Roderick is really more focused now on his studies. He has become a leader within his class."

He has never met his father. His mother, Charlene Jackson, is a cook at a McDonald's. She says her son is "a smart kid, but I wanted to make sure he was in a program so he would stay out of trouble, and have a father figure."

Schroeder, who is married, is a father of three grown children. They live out of state with his six grandchildren.

He recognizes that it's important for Roderick to remain connected to his neighborhood, even while seeing the possibilities that exist outside of it. He always makes sure Roderick's mother is OK with their plans for the day.

Last year, Schroeder asked her how she would feel about Roderick being baptized.

"I thought that would be good for him," she says. "You need God in your life."

On July 26, more than two dozen of Roderick's friends and family - including his mother, who had tears in her eyes - were among the hundreds who witnessed the baptism at Montgomery Community Church. "I felt like I was a superstar," Roderick says. "Everybody was cheering for me."

Schroeder says Roderick and his 9-year-old sister, Eleesia, who is also a Whiz Kid, have a good mother who cares deeply about them.

Still, Schroeder worries. "It's not the best of places for him," Schroeder says. "But he's a smart kid. He believes he can go to college. He knows that there's a way out."

And he knows Mr. Bill will help show him the way.

Additional Facts

Whiz Kids in the community

Whiz Kids, a tutoring and mentoring program of the Christian ministry CityCURE, debuted locally in fall 2005 with about 60 students.

The program now has partnerships with more than 50 elementary schools and 75 churches in Hamilton, Clermont, Butler and Warren counties in Ohio and Campbell and Kenton counties in Kentucky.

In group settings, volunteer tutors work one-on-one with about 1,200 elementary school students.

"The growth has outstripped our staffing and our finances," said Whiz Kids director Barry Baker.

The program operates with a \$475,000 budget, mostly from private donors.

Participating elementary schools identify students who could benefit from the program.

After six months, tutors age 21 and up can apply to be mentors, who then meet with students away from the tutoring site. The program has about 70 mentors, and hopes to double that by the end of the year.

Information: 513-345-1041 or www.citycure.org.