

Why Your Program Should Get Involved in National Foster Care Month

Written by Jessica Chung, Mentor Michigan AmeriCorps*VISTA

During National Foster Care Month, Mentor Michigan encourages programs to find ways to utilize mentoring-related events and activities that recruit, recognize, celebrate, and provide service to also recognize, promote, and support the foster care community. In order to help mentoring programs contextualize these goals, Mentor Michigan asked Melissa “Missy” Olgine, AmeriCorps member and mentor coordinator for the Midland/Isabella County DHS-sponsored Helping Others Prepare for Everything (H.O.P.E.) Mentoring Program for foster youth, to share what they are doing and why.

What is H.O.P.E. Mentoring doing for National Foster Care Month?

Our program will work on three projects on May 7, 2011:

1. Thank-you gifts for foster care parents: Mentors and mentees show their appreciation for the foster parents in the community by delivering flowers to their homes. The Midland Gleaners, a retiree group from the community, is helping to put together and deliver the gifts.
2. Professional youth packages: The Midland Gleaners, mentors, and mentees will make "packages" for youth who are aging out of the foster care system that contain helpful tools for their job search: a planner, an USB drive with job-skill tips and templates already uploaded, and a resume portfolio. These will be kept in the local DHS office for dissemination. (Email mentormichigan@michigan.gov for ready-to-upload versions of H.O.P.E.'s job-skill documents.)
3. Community Art Project: Foster care youth, alumni, and others whose lives have been touched by the foster care system will spend a day creating art which explores the culture of foster care by sharing their observations, insights, and lessons on postcards. This postcard project is intended to build community at the same time as it educates foster care professionals, providers, and the general public about the culture of foster care.

What is the main purpose of your events/activities?

Well, quite simply, our purpose is to come together to make a difference in our communities through projects that connect youth and adults as well as promote awareness of foster youth in our community and give back to those who are actively involved in caring for our kids!

What will the Midland Gleaners, the mentors, and the community gain from participating in or observing these activities?

For the Midland Gleaners, these projects benefit both their fraternal organization and the larger community by their reaching out to people they don't know, connecting generations, and developing new relationships while promoting awareness of an important and often misunderstood part of our community: foster care.

For the mentors, these projects provide opportunities to spend some time with their mentees developing Positive Youth Development (PYD) assets, such as competence, confidence, connection, character, caring/compassion, and contribution. They will also get a chance to give back to their community, and make meaningful connections with their mentee's foster parent or guardian as well as other foster youth in the program.

For the community, these projects are important because anytime we strengthen and support one facet of the community, such as foster parents, we are strengthening and supporting the community as a whole. Additionally, the voices and faces of foster youth are often unseen and unheard in our community and this gives our youth valuable opportunities to meet and interact with their community in a safe, positive, and meaningful way. These projects are one more step toward dispelling the myth that foster youth are "juvenile delinquents," "bad kids," or somehow "deserving" of the situation that they are in. Instead, these projects help the community see foster youth as compassionate, caring, and contributing members of society who are in essence just like them.

Why should other mentoring programs participate in National Foster Care Month?

Our communities are always in desperate need of people willing to open their homes to a foster child, especially homes that are willing to take in a teenager. Events/activities that promote awareness of this need and seek to recruit foster homes and caring adults are vital.

Recruitment and promotion must also address the myths that surround foster care. As stated above, most people in the community have very little knowledge of what foster care is and often assume that foster youth are "delinquents" whose behavior landed them in their situation. In reality, these kids are placed in care not because of anything they did, but because of parental abuse or neglect. So, promoting awareness of who foster youth are and the good things they do is pivotal.

However, I think the biggest part of any National Foster Care Month event/activity should be recognizing and supporting the foster care community in some way.

Any event should have some element of this, whether it be through supporting our youth, our foster parents/caretakers, our mentors or other supportive adults, or recognizing and celebrating caseworkers and child protection service workers. Our workers, mentors, and foster parents are overworked and often under-appreciated, and our youth are not nearly celebrated and supported enough. Sometimes even the smallest gestures can make the biggest difference. It's hard to imagine, but some of our youth have never received a birthday card or had someone say that they see value in them. Simple things like thank you cards for our hardworking DHS staff and letters of appreciation for foster parents that do the day-to-day work in the trenches can be just what that person needed to hear that day. It doesn't have to be a large, extravagant gesture -- just someone else acknowledging who you are and the good work you're doing can be huge.