

'What do you want to get out of our time?'

Civic learning mentor program gives students a second chance to succeed

BY BRAD JENKINS ('99)

Stephen and I had been meeting for a couple of weeks, and it looked like we were settling into a familiar routine: lunch at Market One on campus (our usual: burgers and fries) and small talk about life at JMU—his as a student and mine overseeing the student newspaper and teaching.

"So, what do you want to get out of our time together?" I asked. It's a question I routinely ask the students I mentor through JMU's Civic Learning Mentor Experience, which is run through the Office of Student Accountability and Restorative Practices. The goal of the weekly meetings, held for eight to 15 weeks, is to give students who have violated a university policy the chance to be mentored and think through their mission and goals.

The program, begun in the mid-1990s, has grown over the years so that at least 50 students are being mentored at any given time, with a pool of nearly 100 trained faculty and staff mentors to call on.

Usually, students greet my question with a stare or a "Let me think about that and I'll let you know." The next week, I'll ask again, and the response is similar.

Stephen was different.

"I'd like to *do* something," he told me, "accomplish something." He had a couple of ideas: Maybe we could learn something together or work on a project.

Stephen's early reception to being mentored surprised me, given where he'd been when he started meeting with me in the fall of 2012. Already, he had spent a semester suspended from JMU and attending a community college near his hometown after violating alcohol policies for a third time. The civic learning program was his last chance to get through his final year and graduate in May.

It took a while for us to figure out what our "project" would be. As fall turned into winter and Stephen started thinking about graduation, we continued having lunch and I kept listening. Meanwhile, Stephen was trying to figure out what to do with the communications degree he was about to get.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This column originally appeared as a "Be the Change" blog post in June 2015. To learn more about the Office of Student Accountability and Restorative Practices, visit jmu.edu/osarp.*

One day over lunch, Stephen casually told me how he had recently helped some of his friends settle an argument.

"Doesn't conflict bother you?" I asked, adding that I dreaded it. No, he told me, adding that he actually *enjoyed* helping people figure out how to solve disagreements.

"Have you ever heard of the mediation center?" I asked. He hadn't, so later that week I sent Stephen some information on Harrisonburg's Fairfield Center, a mediation group that was looking for interns. It could be a place to test out whether mediation fit him. He eventually got the internship, working about 30 hours a week during the spring semester.

I don't often see the long-term effects of mentoring. After they've finished their required weeks with me, the students I mentor are glad to be done with the program, and I only hear from them again through a reflection paper they write. That's usually it.

I expected the same thing with Stephen. It had been nearly two years since he graduated when a friend heard about my time volunteering as a mentor and asked if I'd write about it. I sent Stephen an email asking if he still had his reflection paper. Somehow, I had misplaced it.

A day later, he wrote back and attached the paper, and I chuckled again as I read his description of me: "a kick-ass mentor." That was a new superlative, but one I am proud to own.

Stephen also suggested we have lunch sometime. So a few weeks later, as the spring semester was winding down, he drove from Northern Virginia and we met for pizza.

Stephen was the same confident, outgoing person I remembered, but he had matured and become less arrogant than when I had seen him as a student, something he'd later confirm.

"I'm getting married!" he announced as we sat down at our booth, then flipped through some photos on his phone before getting to his engagement photo.

Stephen has had several jobs since graduation, all of them in sales, and each one has led to the next. But that first job, right out of college? The interviewer noticed Stephen had worked in a mediation center, and it was the clincher.

I couldn't help but remind Stephen that I had told him about the mediation center during our civic learning days. He hadn't forgotten.

