



NEWS

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GOVERNOR RELL CELEBRATES CONTRIBUTIONS OF MENTORS
DURING CONNECTICUT MENTORING MONTH
President-Elect Barack Obama Joins the Call for More Mentors

HARTFORD, CONN.— The most improved student on the latest Connecticut Mastery Test, Hartford eighth grader Mehmedalija Muskic has come a long way from the timid, withdrawn boy, just arrived from Bosnia, who hid under the desk when the school alarm rang.

In Stamford, 22-year-old Michael Bennett is holding down a steady job and apartment while continuing his education, setting a different example for his children than his father provided him.

And in Bridgeport, 18-year-old Ebonique Allen is graduating high school, a goal she achieved despite attending more than half a dozen schools in three different communities. She's about to start another, this one a choice of her own making: Housatonic Community College.

Behind each of these young people is a mentor who has served as both anchor and compass. In honor of National Mentoring Month, Gov. M. Jodi Rell is recognizing the contributions of these mentors and the thousands of other volunteers improving children's lives by declaring January as Connecticut Mentoring Month.

To increase the ranks of mentors whose numbers fall short of the children waiting for one, Gov. Rell is reaching out to would-be volunteers through radio and television public service announcements that will air throughout the month. Most programs report a shortage of mentors. Boys make up the majority of children on waiting lists.

"Throughout Connecticut, mentors are helping to build stronger communities and promising futures for our children," said Gov. Rell, who is co-chair of The Governor's Prevention Partnership. "The service of these individuals who share their time and talent is one of our most valued assets. Their efforts strengthen our State and demonstrate the great influence of one person's kindness and its ability to touch a life."

"Many children are out there hoping for a mentor," Gov. Rell added. "There are people who want to help but may believe that they aren't qualified or need exceptional skills. What children are looking for and missing is the attention of a caring adult who wants to spend one or two hours a week with them. With so many families struggling in these tough economic times, the need is growing."

Adding their support to the National Mentoring Month recruitment drive are President-elect Barack Obama and Gen. Colin L. Powell, also appearing in public service announcements encouraging volunteers to mentor. Obama's is the first public service campaign to feature the incoming president.

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Mentors will be honored at events throughout the state this month, including The Governor's Prevention Partnership's annual Spotlight on Partners in Mentoring awards breakfast on Jan. 28, recognizing more than 100 businesses committed to youth mentoring, and Central Connecticut State University's annual mentor appreciation day on Jan. 10. Locally, schools and communities will be holding celebration events as well as recognizing mentors on "Thank Your Mentor Day," Jan. 22, 2009.

Jill Spinetti, president of The Governor's Prevention Partnership, which oversees the Connecticut Mentoring Partnership of 200 quality mentoring programs, said that mentors can choose from a variety of programs that best suit their needs and interests: in and after school, in the community or even through e-mail. While overall support for mentoring has risen during the past decade, school-based programs have grown fastest.

"The different choices offered to volunteers have contributed to an expansion of mentoring as a critical resource for our youth," Spinetti said. "We have retirees, parents, single people, students and employees of area businesses. The growth in corporate support has been particularly strong. Businesses have stepped up by providing employees release time to mentor students not only to give back to the community but to take part in strengthening our future workforce."

Research has shown that mentored youth have improved grades and attendance, fewer disciplinary problems and wider career choices. They are also less likely to use drugs or alcohol and get into fights.

Bennett credits his mentor of 11 years, Stamford advertising executive Clif McFeely, with "changing my whole, entire life." McFeely, president of North Castle, was the one positive person in his life who stood by him through good times and bad.

"He told me, 'You are somebody and you will make it,'" Bennett said. "He showed me the real meaning of being a father. Working, having my own apartment, trying to go to school, trying to help others – these are all things I never thought I would have, and I have them because of Clif."

The relationship also has had a strong influence on McFeely, who is developing a new mentoring program for disadvantaged students.

"Being a mentor opened my eyes to a whole other world of growing up," McFeely said. "It's a cliché, but it's true that you get back more than you give."

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