

# Guilford Youth Mentoring Going Strong

By **Pam Johnson**

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Photo by Pam Johnson/The Guilford Courier

Jesse Parente (left) and Adam West are best friends, Guilford High School graduates of the Class of 2001, and young professionals who are volunteering with Guilford Public School students as mentors with Guilford Youth Mentoring.

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## **Making a Difference, One Hour at a Time**

Hour by hour, week by week, Guilford Youth Mentoring (GYM) mentors make a difference in young peoples' lives. The unique partnership, between Guilford schools and members of the community and its businesses and organizations from which mentors spring, is affiliated with the Connecticut Mentoring Partnership and the National Mentoring Partnership.

Since 2000, GYM volunteers have been meeting one-on-one with young "mentees" in Guilford's public schools, and GYM Program Coordinator Barbara Solomon can't say enough about the great work of these trained, compassionate, and caring volunteers.

Now more than 165 mentors strong, the program boasts about 20 mentors who were also once Guilford public school students. Two of the program's newest mentors graduated from Guilford High School (GHS) in 2001 and have been doing a great job in assisting their young mentees, said Solomon.

"These are two young, professional men who are taking the time to mentor," said Solomon of Adam West and Jesse Parente, both 28 years old.

Parente learned of GYM while seeking out volunteer opportunities in his community and shared the news with West. The two signed on in 2010 and completed the program's mentoring relationship training before being matched with mentees.

"I think Adam and I are appealing because our mentees can relate to us because of our age," said Parente.

Best friends in high school, West and Parente work together at Source Medical Solutions in Branford. West is in his second year mentoring a GHS student who is now a sophomore, while Parente's in his second year meeting with a Baldwin Middle School student who's now in 6th grade.

"One of the things that was so appealing about mentoring, to me, is that I didn't have that when I was in middle school. Not being a part of any sports or clubs, there was really nothing for me," said Parente.

That's one of the tenants of GYM-being there for a student who might do a bit better with a little support, recognition, and encouragement in his or her school environment. Parente and his mentee usually like to spend their weekly hour at school outside, talking while throwing a ball or even fishing behind Baldwin. The relationship has built to the point where, "now, [school staff] will tell me he's already come in twice looking for me on the day I'm coming in. He's definitely excited to see me," said Parente.

West said making connections with his mentee was also a process that's blossomed into a neat relationship.

"Last year, we'd walk the halls and he'd talk pretty much only to me. This year, he walks around with a lot of confidence and he knows a lot of people. Last year, he was proud to have an older person walking around with him, but this year he'll say 'That's my mentor,'" said West.

West added he's found being a mentor has taught him how to be accessible for whatever needs his mentee may have that particular day.

"I might be there for him to fall back on me when he needs it, or just to talk or just to have a good time," said West.

At the end of each school year, mentees decide if they want to continue meeting with the same mentors, Parente noted.

"What's great about this program is we aren't paired up with these kids by force; they have the ability to remain with us if they choose," said Parente, adding his mentee's request came in the form of a statement along the lines of, "Now, don't move away on me over the summer!"

"For me, a mentor is someone who helps foster the growth of another person," added Parente. "They do the best they can to help them make the right decisions in their life."

In 2010, GYM celebrated its 10th anniversary, noting milestones including growing from fewer than 20 mentor/mentee pairs in 2000 to 165 by the end of last year, said Solomon. Solomon also shared some of the quotes gathered over the years from mentors and mentees.

From a high school student eagerly awaiting her mentor to discuss a particular problem with her: "I don't expect her to solve my problems. I just think better and can figure out what to do when I talk about things with her. She always listens to me."

From an Adams Middle School mentor reflecting on a six-year relationship with her student: "There's no big, dramatic moment which tells you if your relationship is significant. It's just the day-by-day, year-by-year, deepening friendship as both your lives grow and change. You value the time together and value each other."

For more information about Guilford Youth Mentoring, call 203-453-2741, ext. 269, email [solomb@guilford.k12.ct.us](mailto:solomb@guilford.k12.ct.us), or visit [www.guilford.k12.ct.us/~mentoring](http://www.guilford.k12.ct.us/~mentoring).