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Mentor Dani Howard (shown with her mentee Jesalen Inzitari) has been a mentor for 10 years and is currently the chair of the GYM Board. She proudly states that she is also the first website volunteer!

Howard first began mentoring "for something to do." She used to be a tutor in a children's emergency shelter, so she knows that helping kids is "always a good thing."

Howard describes mentoring in high school as "being an adult friend that can be trusted." She also stresses the importance of matching mentors with mentees, for both participants. Mentors need to feel comfortable and be themselves just as students do for a relationship to work. Howard is a professional singer and voice teacher. Her mentee is an accomplished musician who plays seven instruments and sings with Guilford Voices.

What's the best part of mentoring?

"It's the little things," says Howard. "Today I brought her tacos because I know she loves them, and she was so excited!"

Now in its 13th year, the Guilford Youth Mentoring Program (GYM) is meeting the needs of approximately 170 students in Guilford's seven public schools, and there is a waiting list for more. Program Coordinator Barbara Solomon and her small, but dedicated staff, including Assistant Coordinator Lisa Ott and Administrative Assistant Simona Nerney, coordinate the requests from schools for mentors, organize training programs, carefully interview mentors, match mentors and mentees, communicate with parents and guardians, recruit new mentors, organize events, and manage all other aspects of the program. GYM has become a statewide model for collaboration, recognized by the Connecticut Mentoring Partnership and the Governor's Prevention Partnership.

GYM has a very high retention rate among its mentors, according to Barbara Solomon. Mentors are committed to their mentees, and, while most relationships are established early, in elementary school, requests frequently come from the middle schools and the high school. As Solomon explains, it isn't always the longevity of the relationship that is most important, although many mentors and mentees remain together for several years; it's about filling a need. Mentors are advocates to facilitate growth and development. To students, they are adults who are willing to leave their jobs and their other activities just to be with them for one hour each week during the school year.

It's all about the relationship and not about accomplishing a specific task. This makes the interview process and matching mentors and mentees particularly important. Ott describes the mentor interview as "comfortable time for us to spend with mentors to listen and to learn about them." She explains the care that is taken in matching student and mentor interests, personalities, and energy levels. Information is received from school social workers, parents, teachers, and, of course, from students themselves. The benefits of a mentor relationship include students doing better in school, feeling more competent, feeling safer, and having more options.

Also important to the mentoring process are the principals and secretaries at each of the schools who support the program and work with mentors and mentees to coordinate meeting times and places. For more information on GYM, visit [www.guilfordmentoring.org](http://www.guilfordmentoring.org).

GYM will hold a benefit concert featuring Rob Nolfo and Steve Shelton on Sunday, April 7 from 3 to 6 p.m. at the Nathanael Greene Community Center.