

## Meet Guilford's 'Grandmentor,' Pete Connal



Photo by Pam Johnson/The Courier

As part of January's National Mentoring Month, Guilford Youth Mentoring (GYM) "grandmentor" Pete Connal spent a day putting up "Mentors Matter" recruitment posters around town with his first mentee and now close friend, Tony Dinse. Pete and Tony first met as mentor and mentee at Melissa Jones School (MJS) and continued meeting until Tony graduated from Guilford High School in 2013. Tony, 19, is now a GYM volunteer and, like Pete, currently mentors a youngster at MJS.

**Pam Johnson, Senior Staff Writer**

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### **Pete Connal's Effort Inspires a Second Generation**

You might not guess it if you met him now, but former Guilford High School (GHS) wrestling star Tony Dinse was a small and shy 3rd-grader when he first met the mentor and friend who'd become a huge part of his life, Pete Connal.

As Tony says, Pete had a big impact on him growing up, and all because of one thing.

"He showed up," says Tony. "It was just his being there that mattered."

Their Guilford Youth Mentoring (GYM) relationship began when Tony was a student at Melissa Jones Elementary School (MJS). It continued through Tony's middle school and high school years. By the time Tony graduated from GHS in 2013, there was no question they'd stay in touch—not as mentor and mentee, but as friends.

At 19, Tony's already following in Pete's footsteps by giving of his time to make a difference in a young person's life. The Southern Connecticut State University sophomore is an assistant volunteer GHS wrestling coach and last spring began volunteering as a GYS mentor to a MJS youngster.

Pete is also mentoring another MJS youngster, earning him the fond title of the school's first "grandmentor" among the MJS secretarial staff, who remember him from the Pete-and-Tony days.

As GYM founder Barbara Solomon notes, January is National Mentoring Month, and perhaps one of the best stories highlighting the importance of this program is that of Tony and Pete.

"It's a heart-touching story of a lifelong friendship that is still ongoing after Tony's graduation. Tony is quite an impressive young man, and much of his growth and development was facilitated by his relationship with Pete," says Barbara.

Pete and his wife, Ruth, are proud parents, grandparents, and continuing GYM volunteers. They joined the program not too long after its inception, when Pete was newly retired as a national sales manager for Proctor & Gamble. Friend, GYM proponent, and volunteer mentor Joe Goldberg suggested Pete might want to give volunteering with the program a try. Then as now, GYM mentors receive training and work closely with GYM administrative staff and school social workers to make each school visit, generally once per week, as meaningful and worthwhile as possible for each mentee. According to GYM, statistics show that by being a positive role model, mentors can help children feel safe and secure, help build their self-confidence and give them a sense of having more options for their future, among other positive effects.

Tony still remembers the day when the MJS social worker let him know he could have weekly visits with a GYM mentor, if he'd like.

"She told me there was going to be someone coming in who would take me out of class and I could do whatever I wanted-that there was someone coming in just for you, so you can take a break! I was kind of hyper," says Tony, smiling.

Tony talked it over with his parents and decided to give it a try. Pete remembers the first day he met the young man.

"He was extremely quiet," says Pete, who quickly picked up on Tony's love of basketball (the two still get together to watch UConn women's games on TV). "We just played Nerf basketball and mini basketball."

That's pretty much how Tony remembers it, too-with the added perspective of a youngster's point of view.

"I remember my mom asking me how it was going the first time I met Pete," says Tony. "I said, 'Mom, I don't know...This guy is so old!' The second time my mom asked how's it going, I said 'Mom, this guy is always talking!' The third week she asked, I said, 'Mom, this guy can't jump!'"

Pete says it's interesting that Tony picked up on how much he talked. As with his latest mentee, Pete makes an effort to "engage" by filling quiet time with questions and comments.

"I'll ask a lot of questions, even if it's just, 'How's school?'" Pete says.

That first year, Tony says he realized just how much he liked having Pete visit, after a four-week hiatus arrived when the Connals traveled the Cayman Islands.

"When he came back, that's when I knew he was important," says Tony, adding he always felt lucky-and proud-to have Pete as part of his school life.

"When I did make friends, which wasn't until I got to Baldwin [Middle School], the first thing I would do would be to introduce Pete," says Tony. "My friends all know who Pete is. So his presence was felt by more than just me. If someone said, 'Who is that guy?' I'd say, 'This is Pete. He's my mentor. He's my friend.'"

While Tony was at Baldwin, Pete received a commendation from Guilford Police for some quick thinking after spotting a resident who had been reported missing due to a dementia episode. Tony made sure the Baldwin administration gave Pete a purple-and-white Baldwin Good Citizen star sticker with his name on it. Pete still has it sealed in the plastic casing over the back of his GYM school identification badge.

There are plenty of extra-special memories, too-whether it was spending some time picking berries in the summer, going to Ashley's for ice cream, or inventing "hall ball" to play during their visits at Adams Middle School ("One of my favorite memories," says Tony). By the time they got to GHS, Tony was so confident and comfortable around others, "he would, in his wonderful way, go into the gym and ask the teachers if we could use half the basketball court so we could play-and they usually would let us," says Pete.

Tony was a bit bigger by then, too, so to keep the playing field level, they'd usually play horse during those GHS visits. A wrestler since 8th grade, Tony grew quickly in his early teens to reach six feet, 5 ½ inches and dominate his high school weight class of 220 pounds (he grew another inch last year, notes this self-described "retired" athlete).

As for how outgoing Tony's become, just ask Pete.

"This guy knows everybody in Guilford," says Pete, adding Tony would often answer the commonly asked, "How tall are you now?" question with typical Tony humor, saying he was "five feet, 17 ½ inches."

As for Tony's decision to become a mentor, Pete says, "It doesn't surprise me.

"I think it's a great thing for Tony. He has grown into a remarkable young man. People say, 'Pete, you did so much for Tony,' but I was just there. It came from inside Tony," says Pete, tapping his hand over his heart. "It came from inside. He's a very strong kid."

*Curious about mentoring? Contact Guilford Youth Mentoring at 203-453-2741, ext. 269, to learn more.*