

FAST FRIENDS

Committed Partners for Youth pairs adult mentors with young people

**By Whitney Malkin
The Register-Guard**

Editor's note: This is the fourth in a series of eight weekly profiles of agencies and programs supported by United Way of Lane County, to coincide with United Way's annual fundraising drive.

Michael needed a friend.

Don wanted a chance to give back.

Fortunately for both, last January the eighth-grader and the Eugene man discovered each other and paired up for the year.

"It's been the most rewarding thing I've ever done," says Don Danielson, who has been mentoring 13-year-old Michael Mitchell through Committed Partners for Youth, a program that pairs at-risk children with adults. "I'm so glad I was given the opportunity to share his life."

Michael was looking for a male figure in his life when his mother heard about the Committed Partners for Youth program and signed him up to participate.

"My dad died in a drunk driving accident a couple of years ago," he explained, keeping his eyes focused on the tabletop in front of him. "I wanted to hang out with somebody that liked sports and thought we could have fun."

Enter Danielson, a 52-year-old who, like Michael, lost his father at a young age.

Working as a loaned executive for the United Way, which gave \$53,000 to Committed Partners for Youth last year, Danielson had heard about the mentor program and decided he needed to help.

When he met Michael, he says, he knew he had made the right choice.

"I think just instantly, we had this natural connection," Danielson says. "We were really able to relate to each other on a lot of levels."

The pair's bond has only grown stronger since January, when they started spending an evening a week together.

They go swimming, shoot hoops, bowl and play miniature golf, their shared time an endless whirlwind of activities, fun and focused one-on-one attention.

"I think it's really good for kids to have someone that comes to hang out and just wants to have fun," Michael says. "It's been awesome."

So awesome that his grades have skyrocketed, earning him a place on Cascade Middle School's honor roll for the first time.

His newfound academic success has sparked dreams of attending Oregon State University - aspirations that Danielson says he does his best to encourage.

During their weekly meetings, the pair visit the University of Oregon campus frequently, a practice that Danielson says he hopes will give Michael a feel for college life.

But things aren't always so serious.

Despite his guidance, Danielson hasn't shied away from participating in activities Michael suggests, such as trips to the arcade and evenings spent playing video games. "He's better," Danielson says, laughing. "He always wins."

Even though he's busy juggling a career as the human resources director for Hynix, Danielson says he knows he and Michael will continue to see each other after their yearlong commitment is up. He says that despite a hectic schedule, the mentoring program has been well worth it.

"Even if a person is busy, I'd like to believe almost anyone can give three hours a week," he said, glancing across the table at Michael with a smile. "It's one of the best investments I've ever made."

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