

WE CAN Child Mentoring Program

by Kathy Ball, Bonner Scholars Coordinator

Purpose

- Matches Bonner scholars with at-risk youth to mentor in an attempt to mitigate the effects of abusive and neglectful behaviors in the children's lives in the community.
- Provides Bonners with opportunities for strong leadership positions, with the possibility of becoming official staff members.

Background

Since 2000, Bonner Scholars coordinator Kathy Ball has been a member of the local advisory board of the Children's Home Society of West Virginia, which administers the WE CAN Child mentoring program. In the fall of 2001, the Concord Bonner Scholars Program made a commitment to strengthen their relationship with WE CAN. The WE CAN director scheduled information sessions and trainings on campus to accommodate students wishing to volunteer. About eight students, both Bonner Scholars and representatives from other campus programs, were trained, completed the application process, and began mentoring.

In the summer of 2002, the Children's Home Society Advisory Board learned of state budget cuts that would severely impact the WE CAN program. The program was reduced to one full-time staff member, who worked diligently to secure funding from various community sources to continue the program for the 2002-2003 fiscal year. It was determined that many of the staffing gaps in the program could be filled by committed Bonner Scholars. In the fall of 2002 two Bonner Scholars began working as WE CAN program staff. Ten students served as mentors that semester.

A grant proposal was submitted and approved by the Bonner Foundation to provide WE CAN with a VISTA worker for the 2002-2003 year. The duties of the VISTA include further recruitment of mentors and strengthening the collaborations between Bonner Scholars and other campus organizations to benefit the WE CAN program.

How It Works

WE CAN is an acronym for "working to eliminate child abuse and neglect." It is supported by local civic organizations, faith-based organizations, and nonprofit organizations. In its partnership with Concord College, students may serve as mentors, parent aides, child/parent escorts or chaperones, and family visitation center monitors. Due to significant funding cuts and staffing losses, Concord Bonner Scholars have become increasingly committed to seeing this program survive. Bonners are now assuming roles beyond those of the typical mentor. Two Bonners now serve as assistant program coordinator and child/mentor activity coordinator in the WE CAN program office.

Mentoring

To participate as a mentor, applicants must be 18 years old, possess a valid driver's license and auto insurance coverage, and be willing to make a commitment of two to six hours per week for a minimum of six months. Applicants must attend three two-hour training sessions conducted by the WE CAN director, agree to background checks, and provide three character references. It can take as long as six weeks for the application and training process to be completed.

Upon acceptance as a WE CAN mentor, Bonners meet with the program director to review case files and identify potential mentor matches. Bonners are allowed the final choice in selecting the child they will mentor. The WE CAN director assists the Bonner in making initial contact with the family to insure that the relationship gets off to a good start.

Students meet with their match each week, taking them to dinner, helping with homework, or just spending time together. As the relationship progresses, students usually increase their time commitment with the youth. During summer months, if the student is not staying on campus, she or he will often make arrangements to visit the youth or, with the approval of the WE CAN staff and the child's parents, the student may take the child home for a weekend visit.

Mentors must complete monthly contact sheets to report on activities conducted with the child during the month. These contact sheets must also indicate an assessment of child/parent behaviors noted during the month. These reports provide the scholar with an excellent opportunity to reflect on direct service activities, areas of progress, and strategies for future contact.

Bonniers may also file expense reports each month to be reimbursed for mileage and other direct costs associated with the mentoring relationship. Due to current constraints on the WE CAN budget, Bonner Scholars are encouraged to request community funds for such expenses.

WE CAN Student Coordinators

To serve as a staff person for WE CAN, Bonniers must meet all the requirements of a mentor and participate in additional training provided by the director and other child service agencies. Preferably, applicants will have a minimum of one year of mentoring experience and be pursuing a degree in social work or education. Staff members are asked to commit more than ten hours a week if they are involved in program coordination.

Due to budget cuts, two Bonniers are currently working in staff positions at WE CAN. The student coordinators are responsible for assisting the director in making family visits, processing volunteer applications, conducting volunteer training, coordinating and securing funding for child/family/mentor activities, and assisting with grant-writing activities.

What Makes The Project Unique

WE CAN provides Concord students with the challenge of becoming personally involved in the life of one child and their family. Each student is responsible for establishing a visitation schedule with the child and for planning appropriate activities to benefit the child. These are not part-time service placements: being a WE CAN mentor means building a full-time relationship with a child and being available to that child in times of crisis. Students are empowered by the positive impact they can make when they develop this relationship. Students can also increase their level of involvement and responsibility while serving in the program by becoming official staff members of WE CAN.

Benefits

Learning Experiences

WE CAN provides an excellent opportunity for students to gain invaluable real-life experience, particularly in fields such as social work, counseling, psychology, and education. Students learn techniques for dealing with difficult situations and difficult individuals. These real-world learning situations are invaluable to the students.

Volunteers Working Together

Because several students are involved with the same community program, there are opportunities for sharing experiences in both formal and informal settings. Students often call upon their fellow mentors to help resolve conflicts. They also plan activities that they can do jointly with two or more of their WE CAN participants. As there are other students not involved in the Bonner program who work with WE CAN, volunteers are given the opportunity to interact with a diverse student population.

Resources And Partners

The WE CAN Program and the Children's Home Society

- Provide the basic structure for this mentoring program.

The Bonner Foundation

- By providing community funds to support students who are mentoring and providing a VISTA

worker who can help recruit volunteers and coordinate activities, the Foundation adds to the success of the partnership between WE CAN and Concord. The Bonner Scholars Program provides skilled students who can assume leadership roles on the WE CAN staff.

Community Agencies

- Donations from various community agencies, including the United Way, the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, local faith-based organizations, and civic groups have helped to keep the WE CAN program alive.

Overcoming Challenges

This program requires a very high level of commitment that not all students are in a position to make. Care must be given when approving students to serve as mentors in one-on-one relationships with children. Also, not all mentoring matches are successful, and this can be very discouraging to students. Counseling may be required to ensure that the student doesn't lose faith in him- or herself or the program.

How to Make it Grow

Additional funding must be secured to maintain the program. With cuts in federal and state funding for such service programs, the challenge is to find other sources of support within the community and other agencies that support this type of work.