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THE WISE MENTOR by Mary Mastro

When Odysseus set sail for Troy, he left his son, Telémakhos, under the wise guardianship of his loyal friend and advisor, Mentor. This idea of mentoring, guiding and caring for a younger person, to encourage and inspire that person on his or her journey through life, is as important in the modern world as it was in the ancient world.

WISE programs across the country are based on the concept of mentoring students: a teacher, counselor, or administrator within a

school system volunteers to mentor a student and meets with the student, face-to-face, for a full mentor meeting each week. The student chooses a mentor who will encourage, direct and inspire him or her to explore and complete a project and then works closely with that mentor.

During the weekly mentor meeting, the mentor reads the student's journal, responds to daily entries, reacts to setbacks or disappointments, rejoices in personal growth and development and makes suggestions that might be helpful to the mentee. A mentor is a listener, a guide, a "coach" and a professional friend who also acts as a resource during the student's quest for knowledge, from initial mentor meetings through to presentation and evaluation when the mentor, along with community and student evaluators, celebrate the mentee's final presentation. Throughout the WISE project, this young adolescent sees the mentor as an

advocate during the journey of individualized learning.

WISE mentors participate on the Task Force with volunteer students and community members. They work together to make decisions for the program, interacting with other mentors, exchanging ideas, assisting one another with placements for possible internships, planning in-school days, providing speakers, meeting with prospective students for the following year, visiting placement sites and planning trips for all of the students involved in the program.

Mentors from many WISE schools remember their mentoring experiences with great joy and enthusiasm: Paula Kirifides, WISE Co-Coordinator with Angela Bastian, and English teacher at Hollywood Hills High School in Florida, defines her greatest joy in mentoring as "listening to students." She finds that

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Nyack High School teacher Lynn Giles-Harris in mentor meeting with senior Michael Hanley (WISE Project - Elementary School Teaching)

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"many students today do not have anyone to listen to them." As students talk during their mentor meetings, she can see "meaning being made as their faces light up with ideas." She enjoys listening to students as they "put pieces together and come to an understanding of those ideas."

David Spidal, former principal of The New York School for the Deaf in White Plains, NY, sees mentoring as an "awakening of the spirit because it enables one to personally guide and lead a student through a process of reaching an ultimate goal. This is especially true for students with disabilities, and it makes your heart feel good to show students the way to achieve on their own."

Mary Lou Montalto, WISE Coordinator and mentor at New Rochelle High School in NY thinks that mentoring is "probably one of the most difficult and challenging things to do. A mentor must remember to listen between the lines. It's like being a parent – say your piece, but allow the student to make decisions, and be supportive of that decision."

In "How Does a WISE Village Raise the Child? Maybe With Mentors Everywhere," by Maritza MacDonald and Tamora Lucas,

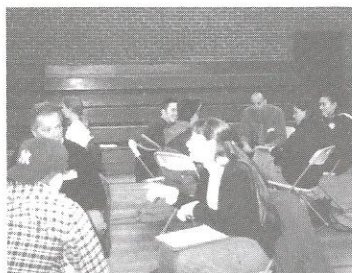
NCREST, presented in a WISE Services workshop at the Coalition of Essential Schools Fall Forum in 1995, the researchers found that mentors were the kind of people who were "accessible and understanding." Students selected mentors because they had been "understood, supported and encouraged by those individuals at other points in their high school years." Students also selected mentors because they "trusted them," "could depend on them" and because the person "knew them well." Mentors are people who "are always there" when students need them.

Additional research on mentoring by Tamara Lucas, Ph.D., Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Foundations at Montclair State University in New Jersey, and Vic Leviatin, President of WISE Services, shows that "teacher resistance to experiential learning often dissipates when teachers observe students they have written off as underachievers excel academically, become excited about learning, and become self-directed learners." They find that "educators become more open to new methods when they learn that their students have grasped and can apply academic concepts they didn't absorb through traditional pedagogies."

To share their reflections about mentoring, Scarsdale High School mentors produced a videotape titled, "A Conversation about Mentoring." Neil Ginsberg, a social studies teacher, recalls, "what was very exciting was that I learned so much in my role as mentor. Students give mentors books to read and have philosophical discussions. There was no exact formula, but that's the best part. You, the mentor, come up with this schemata and the student gets involved in the middle of it, and everything changes."

Other Scarsdale teachers also enjoyed the mentoring process and found rewarding satisfaction in being mentors. Carol De Soe, math teacher, sees the mentor as a "person in the role of learner." Jeanne Cooper, English teacher, commented: "Even though you may not know everything, you get to share in the electricity of learning," and David Greene, social studies teacher, remarked: "If a student's ability to teach grows, understanding grows in this one-to-one relationship."

At the 8th Annual WISE Conference, Peggy McCarthy, Farmington social studies teacher and mentor, led a workshop on the basic mentor meeting. In this workshop, she spoke about the mentor as the



Teachers and students discuss mentor challenges with workshop leader David Greene of Scarsdale High School

Mentoring is an "awakening of the spirit because it enables one to personally guide and lead a student."

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person who helped students “learn how to learn.” She explained that mentors “share other ways to do better journals, establish expectations that both the mentor and the student need, to be ‘open’—like a relationship with a coach.” “In some ways,” she explained, a mentor is a “quasi-counselor who uses strategies to get students back in focus.”

One of the many mentors attending the WISE Conference, Fred Willson, a Spanish teacher from East Lyme High School, CT, found that “students have no problem learning about what interests them.” As a new mentor, he became aware of the complexity of his students’ projects and shared his thoughts: “It is so important to find a balance between letting students go and directing the project. There are so many ways to look at the project globally, but it is the journey that is always emphasized.”

Linda Green, the WISE Coordinator at Nyack High School in NY, pointed out: “The more the mentor challenges the student, the more successful the project; teachers who mentor for a long time are always open to new ideas.” Roberta Moloney, a dedicated mentor from Woodlands High School, and now a member of the WISE Services staff, explains: “The mentor is the

guide, but it is the student who has to see the light. The mentor supports and helps with direction, but it is the student who must show personal growth and development.”

In the Woodlands WISE Yearbook, students through the last 25 years have commented in letters that their mentors “helped us see each other for who we were, and taught us more about life and the direction we were going”; “guided, prodded, questioned, and encouraged you through the maze of your experience”; “let me discover the benefit of quiet and focus in my own time”; “taught me to push myself to another level” and “knew I had more potential than I gave myself credit for.” One student wrote: “The sense of community and responsibility that I was given by my mentor and the other mentors, organizers and facilitators was profound for a public high school. They took this sixteen-year-old who had always simply followed directions well, and said ‘OK, you figure it out. What do you do next?’ It was a wonderful and challenging way to learn; to learn how to think.”

Each year in WISE schools across the country, a young Telémakhos selects a loyal, trusted mentor as a guide on the journey of learning. WISE mentors

know that the journey for the young person is the same as journeys they have taken somewhere in their own lives. They intuitively understand the importance of the students’ search for meaning as they learn.

Mary Mastro mentored hundreds of WISE students during twenty five years of teaching English at Woodlands High School. Retired in 1998, she is a WISE Services staff member and on the editorial board of WISE Journal.

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Francine Hertz and her mentee Jonathan Favata tell about starting a WISE program at Rondout Valley High School