

One Makes All the Difference

BY VIRGIL GULKER

While most at-risk students do need help with academic skills, their greatest needs, according to their teachers, are emotional and social. KIDS HOPE USA gives resource-strapped schools a partnership with a compassionate resource in the community—the local church.

At-risk children in our community don't need any more programs," observed the mayor of a city plagued by gang-related youth violence. "What they need is a caring adult to put an arm around their shoulder and say, 'I love you.'"

I had challenged this mayor and other leaders in religion, education, human services, and law enforcement to answer this question: "How could churches impact the lives of growing numbers of at-risk children?" They responded with one voice: "Churches can make a profound difference in the lives of these children if they will mobilize and train their members to form on-going one-to-one relationships with the youngest children." These words inspired the creation of the KIDS HOPE USA (KHUSA) mentoring model.

The mayor was talking about children like Jacob. When he was referred to KHUSA, he had already been arrested twenty-five times for arson and sent to a school for pyromaniacs. Jacob was only five years old. His principal told me this child, whose parents abandoned him shortly after birth, was searching for proof that someone—just *one* person—cared about him. Each life-threatening fire was a desperate plea for love.

Weeks after he was matched with Mr. Tom, Jacob's attitude and behavior changed. He didn't need to light fires anymore because he knew that Mr. Tom cared about him. Nine years later, Jacob is a "B" student and plays in the high school band.

Initiated in 1995, the KHUSA mentoring model celebrates the remarkable power of one by teaching churches to engage their own members in one-to-one relationships with high-risk children at a local elementary school. We target the youngest children because this is the age when values are formed, self-esteem is developed, and critical problem-solving skills must be acquired. It is no accident that 75% of the children who join gangs do so by age twelve.

While most of these children need help with academic skills, their greatest needs, according to their teachers, are emotional and social. Poverty, broken families, fatherlessness, drugs, abuse, and other factors over which the young child has no control seriously limit his ability and motivation to learn. "I want you to see these children as emotional checkbooks," a principal observed. "What they need is a deposit of love in their hearts."

Mentors use a weekly one-hour meeting with the child at the school to make that deposit of love. While the hour may involve a variety of relationship-building activities, including tutoring, what happens during that hour is often less important than the hour itself. Having a KHUSA mentor return to see them — *only them!* — week after week after week gradually and lovingly erodes their negative self-image, replacing it with hope. They begin to believe in themselves because this persistent friend believes in them.

"How many other kids do you see at my school?" the children ask their mentors repeatedly. One sexually abused first grader asked that question nearly fifty weeks in a row. Amanda could not believe she possessed sufficient value to make someone like Miss Kathy come back into her life. "I have been waiting all my life for you to be my friend," said another child to her mentor.

The behind-the-scenes prayer partner linked to each adult-child relationship is unique to KHUSA. Teachers tell us that the prayer partner is often the only person in the world who prays for this child. A prayer partner in Hawaii observes, "Prayer is more powerful than the direct help I could give a child. The work that needs to be done in the lives of these children can only be done in God's strength...."

We sometimes wonder who receives the greater blessing from the relationship, the mentor or the child. A child in Indiana believes he knows the answer to that question. Asked to describe KHUSA, he said, "Old people come to KIDS HOPE when they need a friend. Then KIDS HOPE goes to the elementary school to find kids like me to be their friend." Many mentors agree, noting that this is a unique opportunity to make a difference in someone's life in Jesus' name.

KHUSA has grown from three pilot programs in Michigan in 1995 to a network of 463 programs in twenty-seven states today. Representing over thirty denominations, these programs provide mentors for over seven thousand children. Significantly, over 70% of the new programs each year develop by word-of-mouth as pastors, mentors, teachers, and other school personnel tell friends and colleagues how churches can be the difference for vulnerable children.

The strongest advocates for KHUSA are the educators who see how mentors impact the lives of the children. Over 50% of all requests for KHUSA programs come from superintendents, principals, and teachers, and over four hundred schools are waiting for a connection with a Christian church. Faced each day with growing numbers of children whose needs for love cannot be met by teachers alone, they turn to the only organization in the community that has the words “We love” in its mission statement. That organization is the local church.

Dr. Lori Tubbergen Clark, superintendent of schools in Newaygo County, Michigan, a high-need rural area, was so determined to get KHUSA involved in her schools that she wrote and secured a grant to fund the program. Then she worked with community leaders who implored area churches to get involved in *every* elementary school in the district.

The same interest is expressed in urban districts like Houston, Texas, where 80% of the children are at-risk. Harvin Moore, Houston Independent School District board president and a KHUSA mentor, is working with KHUSA to develop programs in 180 schools. In his words,

At-risk kids have the same need as any other child for a stable adult role model. It’s just that they usually don’t come with one. One of the greatest things we can do today to change the outcomes is to unlock the potential of adults in the community and get them into the schools as mentors. KIDS HOPE USA takes that simple idea and makes it a reality for an entire school by using the incredible human talent found in our churches. The program is fantastic and I wish we could have it in every school.

Let me say this another way: the public institution in this country charged with the education and nurture of 49.6 million children is asking the Christian church to help them love the children. The opportunity should beggar our imaginations.

Educators endorse KHUSA first and foremost because it works. According to their teachers, 99.3% of the children with KHUSA mentors show improvement in academic performance and motivation to learn. Most also show significant changes in attitude and behavior.¹ The children care to learn when they learn that someone cares about them.

But school leaders also recognize that KHUSA gives resource-strapped schools a partnership with a compassionate resource in the community. In the words of Howard Napp, former Superintendent of Byron Center, Michigan, Schools, “The relationships that have developed through the focused vision of KHUSA bring all our stakeholders—including the church—together on behalf of the children.”

Students grow, but so do mentors. Four out of five mentors report that this relationship with a child has strengthened their faith; most note that this relationship has deepened their commitment to their church. Pastor

Steve Spurlock at University United Methodist Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, echoes what so many mentors tell us: “My relationship with this child is one of the most important things I have ever done in my life.”

KHUSA mentors are careful to respect the separation of church and state. Suzii Paynter, the director of the Christian Life Commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, observes, “the KIDS HOPE USA mentoring program represents the best of Christian citizenship in the public square. Church/state legalities are honored and respected, while not compromising the legitimate transforming impact a local church can have on neighborhood at-risk children and families – love via relationships.”

“We’re not there to proselytize. We’re there to be Christians,” says Dr. Bill Shiell, pastor and KHUSA mentor at First Baptist Church, Knoxville, Tennessee.

KIDS HOPE USA has been recognized by three U.S. presidents and cited by the Points of Light Foundation as “the premier paradigm of faith-based mentoring in America.” In 2006-2007, one out of every four KHUSA programs received awards from local schools, school systems, civic groups, and child welfare organizations.

The recognition that matters most, of course, is the success of the children. I love to share the story of the sixteen at-risk children at North Ward Elementary School who received a KHUSA mentor and a behind-the-scenes prayer partner from Allegan (Michigan) United Methodist Church. Against the odds, all of these children recently graduated from Allegan High School. Angie, Sarah, Ashley, Taylor, Curtis, Kimberley, Chad, Ryan, Josh, Brian, Sara, Krystal, Tony, Carla, Nate, and Amanda have hope and a future because a caring Christian mentor, working in concert with teachers and parents, helped them believe in themselves.

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NOTES

1 Linda Warner, Megan Mullins, and Laurie Van Ark, “Giving Youth Hope: An Evaluation of the KIDS HOPE USA Mentoring Program – Executive Summary” (Hope, MI: The Carl Frost Center for Social Science Research, 2008), 3.

2 For more information about KIDS HOPE USA (KHUSA), see the organization’s Web site, www.kidshopeusa.org.



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