

**KIDS 'N KINSHIP**

# Mentoring program builds lasting relationships

■ *Everyone benefits from partnerships between mentors and local kids who need role models*

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Editor

**F**or Mike Venner, being a mentor is a long-term commitment.

Venner has spent the past 11 years volunteering for Kids 'n Kinship, a Dakota County program that matches adults and families with children who need an adult role model in their lives. His first relationship lasted five years until the boy went to college. The second, with a Rosemount boy, is still going strong after six years.

That boy is 13.

Not all Kids 'n Kinship relationships last so long. The 37-year-old group typically asks volunteers for a commitment of at least one year to provide some stability for the children they mentor. But many relationships grow well beyond that.

The first child Venner mentored lost some interest in his

## More kids waiting for mentors

Could you be a Kids 'n Kinship mentor? Here is just one of the kids looking for a connection in Farmington.

Emma, age 5, lives with her mom and siblings in. She can't wait to have a mentor of her own because her older brother has been matched with a mentor for over a year now. Emma enjoys finding butterflies, making snow angels and snowmen, riding her bike, coloring and playing dress up and imagination. She would love to learn to dance like a ballerina. Emma is a girly girl who likes sports and animals too. She is waiting for an active individual or couple (please with pets) to mentor her.



regular meetings with Venner as he got older. He wanted to spend more time with his friends. Or with girls. But they still stay in contact and still get together every once in a while.

Venner believes his presence in the young man's life made a difference.

"I've been told by his mom and his grandma I had an influence on him," Venner said. "I got a

very nice letter from his grandma at one point."

That's the kind of impact the program hopes for. Many of the kids are referred to Kids 'n Kinship by school social workers who believe they could benefit from another adult influence. Others are signed up by parents.

"Generally, the children in our program are children who need an additional positive role

model," said Ingrid Henry, who oversees Kids 'n Kinship in Rosemount. "Usually they are from a single-parent home or they live with grandparents or another guardian."

Often kids are referred because they have started to act out in school or because they are having other problems.

"Our hope is we can provide them the support they need so they can thrive," Henry said.

That isn't always easy. Finding mentors for the kids, who typically range in age from 5 to 16, can be a challenge. There are currently five kids in Rosemount who are matched with mentors. There are five who are waiting. Some kids wait two years or more before they're matched.

Henry said it's especially difficult to find mentors for boys. There are more boys than girls referred to the program, and typically fewer men interested in volunteering.

Kids 'n Kinship also allows families to volunteer. That can provide an opportunity for a couple's children to act as siblings, Henry said.

Serving as a mentor doesn't take a big commitment. Kids 'n Kinship asks volunteers to

spend an hour or two a week with their kids. The group gets free or discounted tickets to sporting events and museums and it sponsors group outings for all of its volunteers several times each year. On Sunday, Kids 'n Kinship sponsored an ice skating party.

But a weekly get-together can be as simple hanging out and talking.

The rewards of even that simple interaction can be significant.

"I want to show him there's a lot he can do, a lot he can accomplish," Venner said. "There's a lot out there that these kids don't generally get a chance to do — go to a sporting event or play a musical instrument. This gives them an opportunity to see a lot of those things."

The same is true for volunteers, who get to go apple picking or tubing. They get to do things they wouldn't necessarily do with their adult friends.

"They get to have a fun time and they get to feel like they are making a difference in a child's life," Henry said. "It's a really rewarding experience."

For more information about Kids 'n Kinship visit [kidsnkinship.org](http://kidsnkinship.org).