
Utah Youth Mentor Project: Program has benefits for all involved

By Katie Drake The Salt Lake Tribune

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Skylar Goodspeed knew he needed someone to talk to, but what really appealed to him about having a mentor was the snowboarding.

Three years later, the Sandy youth is thankful for more than the occasional chance to hit the slopes. His relationship with the Utah Youth Mentor Project has given him a place to live, a chance at an education and a special friend in Bert Dart.

Dart has served as Goodspeed's mentor though his transition out of foster care at 18, also called "aging out." The Salt Lake City attorney and his wife, Dorothy belong to a mentoring group through the Utah Youth Mentor Project to help foster teens' transition to adulthood.

Children in foster care face many issues when they age out, said Marianne Brough, the project's coordinator. Few have the resources or skills needed to live successfully on their own, and often cannot count on their biological families for help.

That's where mentors like Dart come in. While they do not offer financial support, mentors act as a friend and example to these youth. For Goodspeed, the biggest benefit has been having someone to talk to.

A group approach to mentoring group provides certain benefits, Dart said. Each mentor brings a different skill set, whether it's Dart's legal advice or teaching teens how to grocery shop using coupons.

"All the mentors become mentors to all the kids," Dart said.

The program has given Goodspeed help in striking out on his own. During his senior year of high school, he worked for KFC and did landscaping work for Salt Lake County, but made only around \$7 an hour. The money just wasn't enough to live on, but the mentoring project helped him land a position where he could live independently.

Goodspeed is now the manager of Milestone House, a home for foster youth who have aged out. The home, owned by Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, lets teens pay reduced rent while they find good-paying jobs or get further education. Another program, Money Smart, teaches youth money-management skills.

With more than 400 Utah youth expected to age out of foster care this year, more mentors are needed. Dart said the most important thing is to accept the teens for who they are, and not who mentors might want them to be.

"Our biggest problem is people trying to fix these kids," Dart said. "They are good kids, they've just been dealt a tough hand in life."

Both Dart and Goodspeed admit that a mentoring relationship can be awkward at first, as both parties stumble to find common ground. The program helps match mentors with teens through speed-dating events in the hope they will be paired with someone with shared interests.

And while Goodspeed and Dart still enjoy hitting the slopes together, both say a mentor needs nothing more extraordinary than a listening ear.

"Bert's just a regular old man," Goodspeed said with affection.

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