



HAND IN HAND

How Mentors and Mentees in Indianapolis Are Learning About God's Love Together

by
Brittany Campbell

I imagine waking up one morning at the age of 13 and remembering that the nightmare you had was not a dream. It's your reality. Your name is Marcela*. You have two sisters, 9-year-old Rosa* and 10-year-old Isabel*, and your parents are gone. Your grandma takes care of you now, and as much as you love her and know she is doing her best, you miss your parents. You miss your mom's hugs and the way your dad's voice sounded over the phone.

It is hard to believe that the trauma you have experienced was anything other than a nightmare. What do you tell people when they ask? Do you share with them the truth that your mom overdosed on drugs and your dad was killed by a gang member? Or do you ignore their questions?

It has been over a year since it all happened, and maybe you feel you have to pick yourself up and

carry on with your life. Maybe you hold in the pain and pretend that it doesn't bother you. Maybe you build up walls for fear that someone will draw close to you but then just leave you. Maybe you can't control your emotions and any little conflict causes you to explode with rage.

Maybe you are waiting for someone to come alongside you and walk with you through this nightmare.

Two years ago, Marcela, Isabel, and Rosa lost both their parents in a matter of a few months, leaving their grandmother to care for them. The girls' struggle to cope with their trauma became a cry for help—a cry that staff and volunteers at Shepherd Community Center heard.

This cry is one shared by many children in the Indianapolis, Indiana, USA, neighborhood where

Shepherd Community Center—a Nazarene Compassionate Ministry Center—works. Here, an estimated two-thirds of the children are born into single-parent households—just one of the realities that has prompted the church in Indianapolis to live out James 1:27's call “to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

A Multifaceted Approach

Adults have been mentoring youth at Shepherd Community since it started in the mid-1980s. However, the compassionate ministry center began a more intentional youth mentoring program in 2010. Now, 44 young people have one-to-one mentoring relationships with adult volunteers from congregations across denominations throughout the Indianapolis metro area—including Shepherd Community Church of the Nazarene next door to the center. But these relationships are only one piece of Shepherd Community's larger continuum of care. The center's programs reach out to children from before they are born until after they graduate from college. Last year, these programs served around 350 youth.

“We have found that multiple relationships with trustworthy adults are essential for our neighborhood youth to break out of situational and generational poverty,” said Daniel Fuller, Shepherd Community Center's mentoring coordinator.

According to Fuller, studies have shown that at-risk youth who overcome poverty can point back to eight to 10 adults who were integral in helping them succeed.

“Our mentors are only one of the eight to 10,” Fuller said, “which is why mentoring is a part of our continuum of care that follows our youth from birth to age 25.”

A Consistent Presence

Youth mentoring requires people who are willing to be patient with the ups and downs that children, especially those who have experienced trauma or poverty, face. Mentors are asked to spend one to two hours with their mentees outside of the other Shepherd Community programs in which their mentees participate. The goal is for this time to be as relational as possible. Rosa's, Isabel's, and Marcela's mentors have all



Rosa's grandmother does her best to care for Rosa and her two sisters, but it helps to have mentors like Chelsey in the girls' lives. Photos courtesy of Shepherd Community Center



Mentors at Shepherd Community Center spend at least one hour with their mentees outside of scheduled program time.

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learned the importance of this intentional time to connect.

“Rosa needs a listening ear and compassionate heart,” said Chelsey Wiley, Rosa's mentor. “I know she can be a roller coaster of emotion, and needs a consistent release and encouragement that what she is doing matters.”

The program's mission goes beyond simply attending to the emotional needs of the mentees. It also promotes good physical health and academic performance. The aim, however, that underlies all this is that mentees as well as the mentors will grow in the knowledge of the Father's love for them.



INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA, USA

Total population: **820,445**
Population under 20: **28%**
People living below the poverty level: **18%**
People under 18 living below the poverty level: **27%**
Median earning for workers: **US \$27,258**

Statistics taken from the U.S. Census Bureau.



Renee and Isabel meet weekly for tutoring and other activities, but building relationship is the most important thing they do together.



The foundational goal of the mentor program is that the youth and their mentors will grow in God's love.

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

2 Corinthians 5:17

FROM BIRTH TO ADULTHOOD

SHEPHERD COMMUNITY CENTER'S CONTINUUM OF CARE

Shepherd Community seeks to support children through holistic ministry programs from before they are born to after they finish college.

- **PROJECT JORDAN:** Teaching prenatal and infant care to pregnant mothers and mothers of infants.
- **THE ACADEMY:** Helping preschoolers through fourth graders develop foundational reading skills while teaching them Bible stories as well as honesty, obedience, and diligence.
- **AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS:** Providing academic help and enrichment activities to first through 12th graders.
- **EXCEL PROGRAM:** Keeping learning alive during school breaks through summer activities.
- **COLLEGE COACHING:** Preparing high school students and supporting college students as they enter college.



LEARN

Find out how you can become a mentor. Visit a youth-focused ministry, and discover what daily life is like for young people in your community.

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PRAY

Ask God that children living around Shepherd Community Center would know the incredible goodness of God through the generosity of the center's staff and volunteers. Learn more about this compassionate ministry center at shepherdcommunity.org.

Growing in God's Grace

Before Shepherd Community matched her with a mentor, Rosa would easily explode into fits of anger. Recently, she started seeking God's help with things that are hard or frustrating. A few months ago, Rosa told Wiley that she wanted to learn to do a cartwheel. Every time she failed, she picked herself back up and tried again. One time, she just shouted out to God to help her be as strong as she needed to be in order to overcome this obstacle.

"She has opened my eyes to the urgency of God," Wiley said.

Rosa eventually learned to do a cartwheel, but her mentor gained something even more precious—a deeper understanding of God's desire to commune with us in all things.

Over the last year, Isabel has come to know Christ and openly shares with others about her faith in him. She also often tells other how much she appreciates her mentor, Renee Chase, who encourages her each week that there are people who love her and that she matters.

Isabel's newfound faith has inspired her

grandma to start attending church again. Now as a part of a Bible study as well as the congregation at Shepherd Community Church of the Nazarene, she, though a widow, has been embraced by a new family—the family of God. Recently, the man who killed her son wrote her a letter from prison asking for forgiveness. Through the encouragement of the body of Christ at Shepherd Community, she is taking courageous steps toward forgiving him.

The lives of Rosa, Isabel, Marcela, and their mentors show how meeting together and building trust helps them practice Shepherd Community's mentoring mission: "To provide children and mentors the opportunity to cultivate a lasting relationship that inspires growth in both lives as they become more like Jesus Christ." Their relationships show that it is not complicated to live out God's call in James 1:27. It simply requires us to be obedient and willing to give time to be mothers to the motherless and fathers to the fatherless. ■

* Name has been changed.