A Focus On Friendship

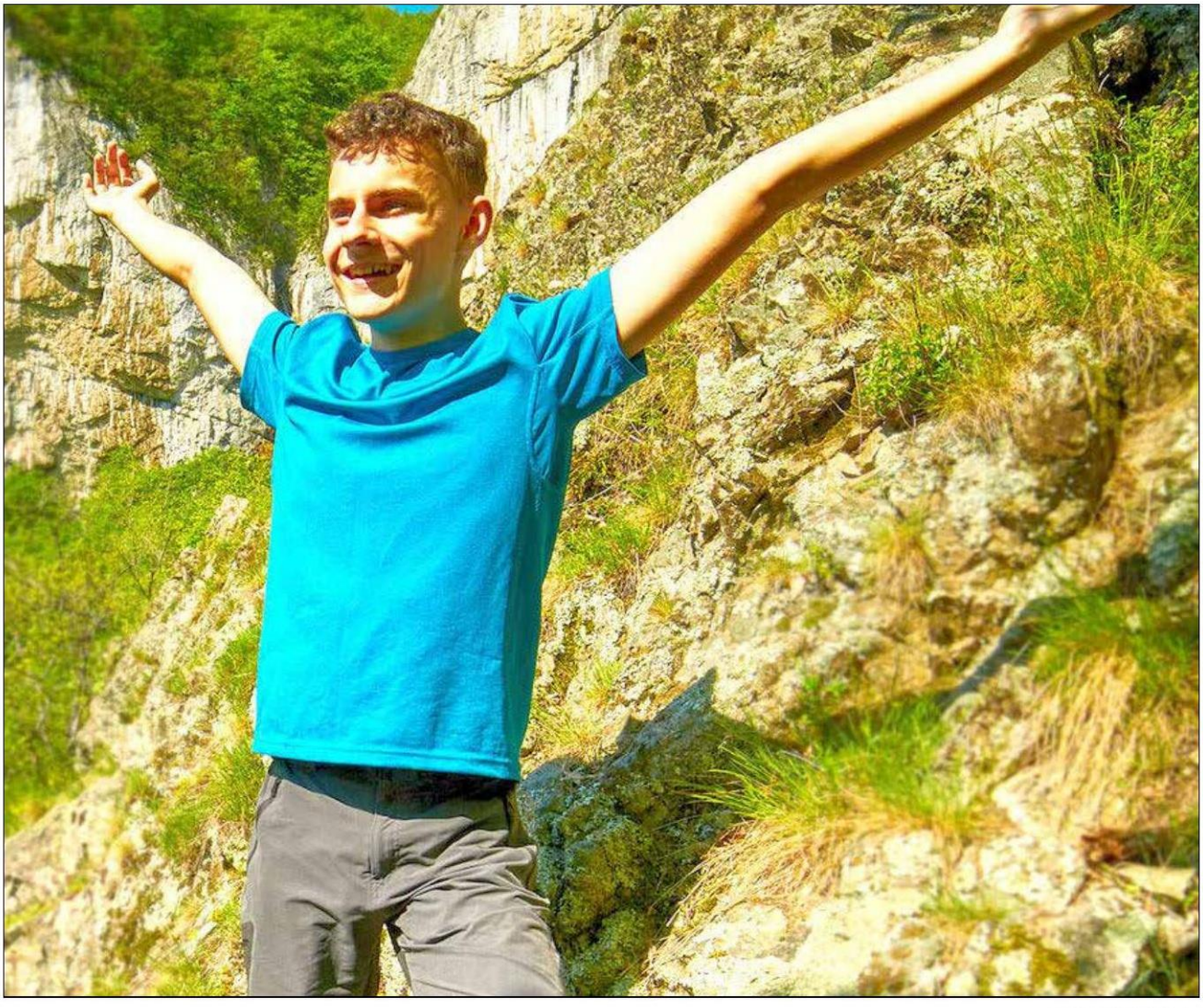


PHOTO SPECIAL TO THE SUN

The mentoring program at Holston United Methodist Home for Children is designed to provide positive friendship relationships for its young residents. The program is being highlighted by the agency during January, which is National Mentoring Month.

Holston Home Mentoring Program Seeks Volunteers

BY EUGENIA ESTES
STAFF WRITER

Mentoring a young person may sound like a daunting prospect for many people.

But, it can be as simple as spending a meaningful hour a week with a young person in an enjoyable activity and listening to their concerns, according to Erin Shores, foster parent recruiter and trainer at Holston United Methodist Home for Children. She also coordinates its mentoring program.

Mentors are making a difference in lives of residents of Holston Home's campus in Greeneville, Shores said, and the organization is sharing information about the program in the community to help commemorate National Mentoring Month in January.

Holston Home began its mentoring program three years ago after recognizing a need. "Most of the kids on campus have family members they call regularly and visit," she said, "but there are a handful who did not have these family resources."

Starting with the young people who did not have regular contact with family, the program has grown to provide mentors for most of the teenaged residents and some of those served in Holston Home's foster program as well, she said.

Not having someone with whom to share special times and to listen to issues and problems can cause a young person to lose hope and that leads to negative behaviors, Shores said, adding that the mentoring program is designed to provide a friend who will care.

Young people who have mentors

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are less likely to have negative behaviors such as bullying, fighting or lying; more likely to continue their education after high school, and more likely to participate in extracurricular activities such as volunteering, according to information from Holston Home.

Mentors for the agency are asked to spend at least four hours a month with the young person with whom they are matched, she said, and that hour can be spent in a variety of activities that both enjoy.

When an individual becomes a mentor and is matched to a young person, the mentor is asked to come to the Holston Home campus for the initial visits to allow time for both sides to become acquainted and comfortable with each other.

It has been interesting to see the creativity of some mentors and the variety of activities that they find to do while visiting campus, Shores said. For example, one mentor discovered that he and his young charge both enjoyed Magic the Gathering card game and both looked forward to playing the game each week. Another mentor would bring fingernail polish on her visits, and she and the youngster she was mentoring would spend time painting each others' nails and talking.

After a period getting acquainted with each other, the mentor is allowed and encouraged to take their young person on activities off campus, such as dining out, attending a play or sporting event, or visiting a park, she said.

Holston Home's mentoring is similar to the Big Brother Big Sister programs in larger areas, Shores said. However, Holston Home's residents often have some special needs, and mentors receive training on what to expect in interacting with their young people.

People sometimes have preconceived ideas of what the young people served by Holston Home are like, she said, but when they meet them, they realize that they are just like other people their age but have had some different, often challenging, life experiences.

Holston Home's residents receive services from counselors, teachers and other professional staff, Shores said, so a mentor's primary responsibility is to be a friend.

To become a mentor at Holston Home, an individual has to be at least 21 years of age and pass a background and reference check. Once approved, mentors go through training to learn more about the agency, its services, what to anticipate in interactions with a Holston Home resident, what is expected of them in their role and what staff to contact for any assistance they may need.

A mentor can indicate the type of young person they would be most interested in working with and Holston Home will match the mentor with that type of person, she said, adding that mentors are asked to make a commitment of a year to the program as consistency is important for meeting a young person's needs.

For more information about the program, contact Shores at 423-787-8786 or erinshores@holstonhome.org.