

# 'They teach you so much': Norwalk program seeks volunteers for virtual mentoring

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Jasmine Prezzie, the new director of the mentorship program at the Human Services Council Tuesday, January 26, 2021, in Norwalk, Conn. Prezzie went through the program herself while in Norwalk Public Schools and credits it with helping her get through college and to where she is now. The mentorship is through the Human Services Council in partnership with Norwalk Public Schools. January is national mentorship month and Norwalk is holding an event Thursday to celebrate their mentorship program.

Erik Trautmann / Hearst Connecticut Media





NORWALK — When Jasmine Prezzie’s name got called over the loudspeaker in elementary school, it didn’t signal trouble ahead. It meant her mentor was there.

For an hour each week from first grade on, Prezzie would meet with her mentor during the school day. In her younger years at Cranbury Elementary School, the two would meet on the playground, sit and talk on the benches, or Prezzie would play on the jungle gym while her mentor watched. Other times, the two would eat lunch together and walk around the school.

After graduating West Rocks Middle School, Prezzie got a new mentor, who happened to be an employee at Norwalk High School where Prezzie was a student. Prezzie credits her mentor with helping her navigate the college application process as a first-generation student, teaching her everything from the power of penmanship to how to enroll in classes.

Now, over 10 years after graduating high school, Prezzie has her master’s degree in social work from Fordham University and became the director of the Norwalk Mentor Program in September — the same program that paired her with her own mentors over 20 years ago.

And even as her life comes “full circle” as she says, she still turns to her high school mentor for advice.

“I had two great mentors,” Prezzie said. “They showed up in my life every single week. I felt they were a part of

my family and I was a part of theirs. It was a great experience hence why I'm a huge advocate for mentors because it really changed my life."

On Thursday, Prezzie will be leading a [virtual celebration](#) of the Norwalk Mentor Program in honor of January being National Mentoring Month. The program will honor mentors, mentees and their families and feature testimony from them.

Prezzie said the program is the first school-based mentor program in both Connecticut and the country. The program is run by the nonprofit Human Services Council in partnership with the school district, and has been serving Norwalk students for over 35 years.

Interested in becoming a mentor?

Contact Jasmine Prezzie at 203-354-1956 or at [jprezzie@hscct.org](mailto:jprezzie@hscct.org) for more information.

To join the Norwalk Mentor Program virtual celebration on Jan. 28 from 5:30 p.m. to 7 p.m., visit <https://e.givesmart.com/events/jYI/>.

Employees within Norwalk Public Schools recommend students for the program if they feel they could benefit from having another adult in their life. And the need is present — according to the program's 2019 end-of-year report, more than half of students in Norwalk said in a survey they didn't have an adult to rely on other than a parent.

The [report](#) also showed the benefits of the program: 80 percent of mentees said their mentor helped them come to school more often and better prepared, while 88 percent said their mentor helped them be kinder. Ninety-four percent of the 280 mentees said they try harder and feel better about their future because of their mentor. Students who stick with the program for several years are even eligible for a scholarship.

Prezzie said staff report children in the mentorship program act out less in class and have better attendance.

Rather than structure their time, Prezzie said mentors can tailor their time based on their students' needs and interests. The sessions happen during the same time each week during school hours, usually during lunch or specials, but are sometimes happening outside school hours now that mentoring is happening over Zoom.

"We always say mentoring should be fun," Prezzie said. "You're not there to be a therapist, you're not there to be a tutor. ... You're there to have fun and be an additional caring adult. We know kids need attention. Some need more than others. We want to make sure you're there and giving them undivided attention."

South Norwalk resident Lucy Ackemann has been mentoring students at Columbus Magnet Elementary School through the mentor program for over 20 years and finds it to be a different experience each time. Mentoring virtually has led to some challenges, but before COVID she would sit and eat lunch with one of her mentees and watch the other play basketball during their time together.

“They teach you so much,” the retired preschool teacher said. “Kids teach adults more than adults teach kids. A lot of them come from homes where there’s not a lot of consistency, or one parent and a lot of kids, or movement so they don’t have the structure they probably need. If they know you’re always going to come...and just have a good time, I think that feels good to any kid.”

Prezzie said there are still about 280 mentors/mentees in the program now. There were about 315 at the end of the 2019-20 school year, but the program lost participants after switching to a virtual model back in March due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Prezzie is working to recruit more people from Norwalk and the surrounding communities, and has about 20 more waiting to be trained.

With COVID-19 throwing routine out the window, Prezzie said it’s more important now than ever before for students to have a mentor to provide consistency in their lives, especially as depression and feelings of isolation increase.

“It’s our responsibility as a community to make sure our students are supported, have resources and are thriving,” Prezzie said. “They are our future leaders. Things start at home, but it’s a community responsibility.”

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