



*Mentors Lauren Minter and Jay Ortega with Mentees Kayla Hall and Sam Chavez*

## **JPA Celebrates Mentoring Every Year, All Year Long**

**January is National Mentoring Month, but JPA's support and mentoring of young people and their families happen every month. Our founder Jane Addams was passionate about helping young people in dire circumstances instead of punishing or dismissing them. We're only in our 117th year, but mentoring's history goes back to The Odyssey, where Mentor guided Telemachus in the search for his father, Odysseus.**

Guiding young men and women toward positive goals and behaviors, especially those from challenging backgrounds, supports their path to the future by sharing our knowledge, experience, and friendship. Its effects are long-lasting.

Through its mentoring program 9th Gear, for example, JPA helps eighth graders and their parents prepare for the transition to high school. You may remember your own transition: a new, bigger building, strange big kids all around, and teachers who may be, well, not as warm and sympathetic as your grade school teachers. Just learning the layout of your new school can be challenging, and making friends while keeping a full schedule can seem impossible. When you feel burdened by problems from home or the neighborhood, it may become even more difficult.

Erin Vanden Brook directs 9th Gear. During the summer between eighth and ninth grades, JPA and adult mentors have fun with kids while helping them learn ways to approach the new situations they'll face in high school. She says, "Every piece of JPA mentoring is designed through a clinical lens," making what happens doubly compelling for students, mentors, and parents, who are invited to participate in parent-oriented sessions.

9th Gear mentors provide the kind of positive energy that gives mentees the confidence to face their high school futures. At one meeting, for example, students pick the questions they most want to ask and have answered; they're in charge of how the session goes.

Students and mentors meet once a week, with a different theme for each meeting. It can be "Know yourself," or "Challenge yourself." Students and

There are

# 9 MILLION

at-risk youth without a mentor in America.

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#MentoringMonth



#MentorIRL

mentors play “get to know you” games and have discussions about what it means to be from their neighborhoods. Each session starts with a meal and ends with mentors, mentees, and JPA leaders reflecting on what they’ve learned about themselves and each other. As the summer goes on, students get comfortable with these new friends as well as how to express their anxieties and get support.

Erin believes “having a positive and trusting relationship with mentors is key. We encourage ongoing communication even after a meeting.” She’s also aware of the cultural gulf that sometimes comes between mentors and students, with many mentors coming from backgrounds very different from their mentees’. “But we address the issues head-on,” she says, because it’s important for everyone to be open and honest about how they feel, and to listen to each other. “These are people,” she comments. “There’s a story; there’s a history.”

While students and mentors enjoy their activities, interested parents meet in a nearby space to discuss the issues coming up for their children. JPA connects with families one on one to start, then provides workshops about helping with the transition to high school, seeing things their children are experiencing through a parental lens, and perhaps most important, building relationships with other parents to support each other during the transition.

Erin and JPA see 9th Gear as a resource creating opportunities for support and a way to answer students’ critical questions. It’s not about telling anyone what to do or how to do it; it’s about hearing everyone’s experience, validating what’s going on in mentees’ lives, and helping them find their strengths without judgment.

If you’ve ever had committed mentors, you know how valuable they were to your own development as an individual or professional.

Mentoring can bring out the best in you and pave the way to a bright future. 9th Gear is one way JPA invests in that future for the young people we serve. We encourage everyone to experience the power of being a mentor, not just during January, but throughout the year.

If you’re interested in being a mentor to an 8th grader from Chicago’s West Side, contact [Erin Vanden Brook](#). You’ll be making permanent, positive change in a young person’s life. You can also find more information about mentoring at [MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership](#).

January is National Mentoring Month, but it isn’t just one month, it’s every month. **JPA**

