



Eric Rosen and future mentees

Mentors, Mentees, and Parents Reunite for Fun and Games

Saturday, January 13, current (and possible future) 9th Gear participants gathered in Shedd Park to renew their acquaintance and share pizza, games, and conversation.



Derrick, son Devin

Derrick Stephens and his son Devin participated with their mentor, Jason Stair. Derrick was pleased with his son's progress as a result of 9th Gear. "It helped him open up more. He's more

social and doing well in school this year," he said. "He used to be really quiet and self-contained, but he's evolving socially." One aspect that helped was getting closer to the other kids in the program.

Mom Cindy Chavez pointed proudly to her son Sam, who was playing Uno at another table. "Sam was having anxiety about the transition," she said. "Connecting with other kids going through the same thing was a great experience for him." She praised Sam's mentors, who shared their own experiences and were great role models. "Sam's a lot more confident now," she said, beaming.

Eric Rosen is a social worker in his daily life but volunteered to be a 9th Gear mentor. He enjoys it because "It's a great program that provides a safe space, fun activities, plus the opportunity to discuss social and emotional issues." He also found that other mentors had a passion for working with youth.

Interviewed separately, Jay Ortega mentions that his own personal struggles at that age informed his decision to be a 9th Gear mentor. He grew up in a middle-class neighborhood on Chicago's South Side but knew kids like those we serve at JPA. "As a minority myself," he says, he felt like he had the opportunity to be a

positive role model for young people who might be going through their own difficulties. “You feel compassion, but you also feel empathy; you try to put yourself in their shoes.”

After the intensive training, Jay was eager to meet his mentees. “I had a vision of what I thought it was going to be like. I thought I was hip and cool.” But he soon realized the complexity and importance of what he was doing. “During the first two sessions, I wasn’t as comfortable as I’d expected.

But then someone told a joke and people laughed. After that, it was a natural progression.” He and his mentees became more comfortable discussing issues like: What scares you right now? and What holds you back in certain situations? “We got to a point where we could open up to each other.”

During the summer Jay got to know his mentees Sam’s and Kyle’s moms as well. “They’re both really great people, very supportive of the program. They really wanted their kids to take something from what we were doing.” It was helpful that Jay had attended Sam’s high school; he was able to provide some inside information about coaches, since Sam was interested in playing football.



Sam Chavez and his mom

His experience has opened his eyes to the value of mentoring. He hadn’t thought about the impact poverty and single-parent situations can have on kids. “It opened my eyes to the actual impact [mentors] can have.” He says his perspective changed from sympathy to empathy, which emphasizes a real connection among people, something many young teens are missing today. “I’ll definitely be back. I think about it a lot. It changed my perspective on a lot of things. There’s real satisfaction in building a good relationship with a kid,” he says. It’s clear the power of mentoring works both ways. **JPA**

