

Friends blossom into graduates

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Time speeds up

for every senior, making it tougher for Jenny (second from left), Trenee and Miranda to schedule time with their mentor, Angel Banta (far left). But they have their scrapbooks, memories and plans to keep in touch. Thanks to Friends of the Children, the girls have bonded "like sisters," says Miranda.

The paid mentorship program, Friends of the Children, shows how connections can lead to commencements

Can't buy me love, the song says. We all believe it's true. Yet for 16 years, a revolutionary nonprofit called Friends of the Children has been showing you can.

Money can buy a stable, permanent connection for a first-grader at risk of failure.

At Portland's King Elementary School, money can match a trained mentor named Angel Banta with a picked-on preemie named Jenny, a fighter named Miranda and a painfully self-doubting Trenee.

What bonds Banta and the girls after 11 1/2 years of homework, drama lessons, swimming, tea parties, tears, fishing trips and fun times is either love or something functionally indistinguishable. It is steadfast.

And it has magical properties. Those three little pals at King Elementary? They're long gone now. But in their place -- in no small part, thanks to Banta's coaxing

and helping the girls discover their strengths -- are three bright stars in Oregon's firmament.

The polished and effervescent Miranda is heading to Santa Clara University this fall. (And, yes, it's that Miranda, Lincoln High School's wildly popular Rose Festival princess. She doesn't see herself as "princess-y," but loves the scholarship money, and also enjoyed playing "Truth or Dare" with the other royals.) Gifted yet extremely modest, Miranda says, "I still have a few rough edges." Oh, really? Where?

The sharp and witty Trenee -- always in touch, always texting -- is graduating from David Douglas. Favorite subject: English. Self-conscious? Muffled? No one who's seen Trenee in action would put those adjectives anywhere within miles of her name. She met Banta and the other girls at King because she had to repeat first grade, which was hard on her at the time. Now, Trenee calls that seeming setback "my lucky charm."

As for the gentle, creative Jenny, she's had some serious trials this spring. She's bunking in with a friend's grandma, attending alternative school and -- in a tough break for any teen -- managing without a cell phone. (Hers was left in a car that got towed.) But Jenny has a big heart and an artistic flair. She sings, she sews without a sewing machine and she thinks for herself. Jenny is on track to finish her high-school equivalency this summer.

What would this trio have been like without the intervention of a Banta? It's impossible to know. Says Jenny: "I don't want to think about it."

The Friends of the Children program is designed with scientific rigor to get kids reading at grade level by third grade, to put them in paid internships that will pique their curiosity, to keep them out of trouble and out of jail. But being a good mentor isn't reducible to science. In what Banta has accomplished there is artistry, alchemy and an element of personal "abracadabra."

If you harp at kids about their grades every time you see them -- as one adult mentor in another mentoring program did; he is not invited to the child's high school graduation party -- you don't cement a friendship.

The connection fizzles.

What Banta provided sometimes was just a code word of support -- which, it turns out, even a Rose Festival princess can use. The day Lincoln students elected Miranda, Banta rushed over to see her crowned, hugged her and repeated a mantra that Miranda will take with her to Santa Clara:

"Miranda, you are good ENOUGH."

Meaning: Don't mourn for what you don't have. You have what you need. Being Miranda, being Jenny, being Trenee is wonderful ... enough.

Parachuting in doesn't work

Sadly, Oregon's revenue calamity has set back many innovations across the landscape of social services, including the cause of mentoring. But the nonprofit Oregon Mentors is working to educate the Oregon Legislature for the 2011 session. (If nothing else, the nonprofit hopes a legislative task force on workforce development will include a representative of mentoring programs.)

For Friends of the Children's founder, Duncan Campbell, it was a dream come true when the National Institutes of Health decided to finance a longitudinal study of the Friends model. (Friends now has chapters in several other cities, including Seattle, Boston and New York.) For five years, the study will compare 256 pupils. Half will be matched with a paid, professional mentor such as Banta, and half will be placed in a mentorless control group.

Friends just secured \$1.2million from the property-tax-funded Portland Children's Investment Fund. But for the most part Friends is financed through private donations. The national research could spotlight mentoring in a new way and persuade Americans that mentoring isn't optional. For children at grave risk of failure, mentoring will likely prove as pivotal and reparative as early childhood education.

Volunteer mentoring programs spring up every day, and I'm not here to knock them. But Friends is unique. Friends selects only children with odds steeply stacked against them, many who have been abused or neglected or spent time in foster care. Many have an incarcerated parent.

With this pool, the research shows that a volunteer who parachutes in only briefly can actually do damage. A short-term relationship can enlarge the hole in the child's self-esteem, the problem the mentorship is supposed to repair. But how do you get mentors to stick with the relationship?

A deepening connection

In designing Friends, founder Campbell concluded that mentors had to be paid professionals. For \$9,000 a year, Friends provides four hours a week of mentoring to a child from kindergarten through graduation. (And perhaps beyond, although Friends hasn't figured out the shape of that beyond.) Each mentor has eight children and sees them year-round.

The connection grows until it is strong enough to cushion blows, deflect nightmares and untwist a path. Mentors are not parents -- "You can tell them anything!" Trenee says -- but it works a bit like parenthood. A mentor's

confidence inspires self-confidence, a mentor's respect sparks self-respect. External motivation ignites internal drive.

Miranda's dream is to be a music recording engineer, but who knows? This is a whiz kid with a personal style that endears her to other people. At Santa Clara she could do anything. And afterward? Heck, I wouldn't be surprised if she runs for president.

Trenee's next stop: The International Air and Hospitality Academy in Vancouver, where she will train to be a flight attendant. Once her passport is in hand, she also hopes to visit relatives in Japan. With her cosmopolitan flair, it's easy to imagine Trenee traveling -- and on top of -- the world.

Jenny, like many teens, is not quite sure what she'll do next. She could blossom in myriad directions. But for starters she plans to enroll in community college and obtain a credential as a veterinary assistant.

As for Banta, it's hard to say goodbye -- and she has no plans to. "I expect to go to my girls' weddings," she says. "I expect to be there when they graduate. I expect to be there when they have their first babies. It's a real connection -- from the heart."

Can't buy me love? Think again. "Unequivocally," Campbell says, "you can."

Paying \$108,000 for 12 years of mentoring is a bargain compared with the price of alternatives. But in an Oregon forever cutting, renegeing and backsliding, it's not clear that people will ever pay, even for a bargain.

You don't dare waste the magnetism of a Miranda, a Trenee or a Jenny. To spend an hour with them is to grasp that. Thanks to Friends, they do have a glimmering of their own value. They just don't live in a state that values them enough.