

"It's good to know that somebody, besides the people who . . . get paid, is there just strictly to help you."

JANMICHAEL ALBRITTON



News-Journal/DEBORAH CIRCELLI

Mentors Suzanne Steiner, foreground, and husband, Walt, rear, kayak with foster teen JanMichael Albritton in the canal behind their home in Ormond Beach.

Mentors help foster teens navigate rough waters

By DEBORAH CIRCELLI
STAFF WRITER

DAYTONA BEACH — When JanMichael Albritton needed help finding a job, he turned to the Steiners to drive him around to fill out applications.

When he needed help getting his driver's license, Suzanne and Walt Steiner let him practice with their car and taught him the ropes.

When the 17-year-old foster teen wanted to visit his grandmother and mother, the Ormond Beach couple drove him more than an hour away for the visit.

The Steiners have become a part of his family as mentors who spend time with him each week through a new program with Community Partnership for Children, the local foster care agency.

"It's really great," said Albritton, who went

with his grandmother for most his life and then another relative. He said his mother, who had him when she was a teen, was "missing in action" at the time he went into foster care and he never met his father.

The Matanzas High School senior, who now stays in contact with his grandmother and mother, runs track, is in honor classes and hopes to attend Daytona State College before transferring to another school.

"It's good to know that somebody, besides the people who are assigned to you and get paid, is there just strictly to help you. (The Steiners) have no other motives," he said. "They do so much. Without them, I wouldn't probably be where I'm at."

SEE MENTORS, PAGE 4C

How To Help

Two programs are seeking volunteers to help foster teens:

■ **Community Partnership for Children** has a mentor program for adults 25 and over to work with teens 14 to 17. The next orientation and training is at 5:30 p.m. March 19 at the agency's office, 160 N. Beach St., Daytona Beach. Mentors must complete a background and drug screening. For information, call Jo Lynn Deal at 386-944-4709.

■ **The 7th Judicial Circuit Guardian Ad Litem** program is looking for volunteers, including attorneys to represent foster children's interests in court. Supreme Court Chief Justice Peggy Quince plans to speak from 4:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. Thursday at Bethune-Cookman University about the "Fostering Independence Project" to get attorneys to volunteer. The event is by reservation only. For information on the event and Guardian Ad Litem program, call Barrie Michaels at 386-235-2297.

LEARN MORE ONLINE: news-journalonline.com

MENTORS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1C

Community Partnership for Children started the mentor program last year, but has recently revamped it since it's had a hard time finding volunteers. More than 50 mentors are needed to either work with foster teens ages 14 to 17 for short-term or long-term projects. Those include teaching them to drive, helping with life skills, filling out job applications, helping with decisions about college and overall "serving as an adult friend" and "giving them professional guidance," said Jo Lynn Deal, the agency's chief development officer.

About 140 local teens are in foster care or group homes. About 40 will turn 18 this year and no longer be under the care of the state.

In addition to the mentor program, the Guardian Ad Litem program, which represents a foster child's interest in court, is also looking for volunteer guardians, especially attorneys. Florida Supreme Court Chief Justice Peggy Quince plans to speak Thursday to lawyers and local judges in a push to get more attorneys to help teens get the services they need. Less than 1 percent of Florida's attorneys are currently participating in the program, officials said.

"The push is to keep (foster teens) from not turning 18 and being empty-handed with no direction or not knowing where to turn for services and help," said Donny Frenette, supervising attorney for the 7th Judicial Circuit Guardian Ad Litem program, which includes Volusia and Flagler counties.

Suzanne Steiner, who is coordinating training mentors for the Community Partnership mentor program, has been working with Albritton for more than a year. The semi-retired insurance agent, who has a 40-year-old son, and her husband, an engineer, eat dinner with him weekly. They've done everything from help with college to going kayaking and fishing together.

After hearing that foster teens are less likely to finish high school or get a college degree, Steiner said she wanted to help some have a better start.

"He's an optimistic kid and he's energetic," she said about Albritton. "I can't imagine being on my own at 18 deciding where to go to college without someone to turn and talk to and bounce ideas off of."

The couple hope to follow him through his college experiences and beyond and later take on another teen.

Albritton, who has lived in group homes and now lives with a couple whom he met from a previous restaurant job, said the Steiners are "amazing."

"Even if sometimes it seems like I'm not grateful, it doesn't matter. They still go out of their way to help me," he said. "They just make life so much easier."

Jennifer Ferguson, a certified financial planner with her own practice in Port Orange, has been mentoring a 17-year-old



FERGUSON

foster teen for more than a year. She and her husband and 3½-year-old son have the teen over to dinner every week. The foster teen, Stacey, whose last name is confidential because her parents' rights have not been terminated, has become part of the family, she said.

"She's a bubbly, happy, young adult who I think will go very far," Ferguson said. "We're friends forever. I see us staying in touch forever."

Stacey, who went into foster care when she was 14 and has lived in four foster homes, said the Fergusons "have given their time and their love and everything so that my life can be easier." They've helped with homework, applying for college, given her a laptop and help transport her to various cheerleading practices and other school events.

Being in foster care can be "very frustrating," the teen said. Having a mentor, she said, "has helped me make the best out of a bad situation."

"It's rough sometimes, but I think every teenager feels they don't have a lot of people to go to," she said. "I've been pretty blessed. It's like an extended family."