

In a retirement community, residents give back to staff by tutoring their children



Marna Tucker, a retired lawyer and resident at the Ingleside at Rock Creek retirement community, has become a tutor and mentor to Cameron Chance Jr., 17, a son of a staff member there. (Jodi Weakland)

By

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This past spring, a few weeks into the pandemic, Monique Sparks's work supervisor asked how her kids were doing. Sparks didn't sugarcoat it. "This socially distant learning is not the best," she said. It was particularly hard on her older son, Cameron Chance Jr., who was in 10th grade when the virus struck.

"Cameron has always been very quiet, and he's very shy. He's not an outgoing person," she said, adding that the Zoom classes and meetings with teachers online were out of his comfort zone. Even worse, the basketball court, where the teenager felt most at ease and where he had hoped a college recruiter might spot him, had fallen silent.

Sparks is a concierge at Ingleside at Rock Creek, a retirement community in the District, and as it happened, other staff members there were expressing similar concerns. Their jobs required

that they show up for work in person, often leaving their children with few resources to navigate remote education.

"This is a real daunting task, trying to do home schooling when they're not trained to do that," said Kiersten Parsons, the facility's independent living administrator. "They're not able to work from home; they're in a front-line position."

After hearing from staffers and from the executive director, who was asking about ways to help them, Parsons had an idea: Why not use valuable resources right there at Ingleside?

"Our residents are academes, with multiple master's degrees, doctoral degrees, a rich pool to pull from for tutoring," she said. When an announcement went out, she said, "there was complete buy-in. All of them wanted to participate, and up to one dozen people immediately even said what grades they could tutor or not tutor."

"It didn't have to be formal," she added. "It could be talking about preparing for college or reading Harry Potter to a small child."

That was how Marna Tucker, 79, a resident who used to practice family law in the District, became involved this fall.

"Being locked in, I said, 'Wow, I have all the time in the world to try to support somebody,'" she said. "And way back in my previous life, I had a teaching certificate."

Tucker was matched with Cameron, now a junior at Reservoir High School in Fulton, Md. In their initial video call, his mother recalled, Tucker put academics aside and asked Cameron about himself: what he liked, what he was good at. "She said, 'Let's get to know you here.'

We're going to get to know each other first, and then I'll help you.' "

They talked about the difficulties of trying to study from home, with Cameron's little brother running around while he tries to work. "I learned a lot about the problems that our staff face, with their kids being alone and trying to deal with school," Tucker said. "It's a tough time for them."

She told Cameron about herself: In 1984, she was the first female president of the D.C. Bar. Her husband of 47 years is a retired federal judge, her daughter is the mayor of Chevy Chase, Md., and her son is a filmmaker in Los Angeles.

Monique Sparks with her son Cameron Chance Jr., 17. She is a concierge at Ingleside at Rock Creek, where resident Marna Tucker has become an online tutor and mentor for Cameron. (Canaan Chance)

Cameron contacts Tucker whenever he needs help with English assignments or other writing — or when he just wants to talk.

"She's a very successful lady," he said. "She's teaching me other ways, how to write different ways. . . . She's taught me ideas and organizing my words, and she showed me how to make my sentences make more sense. I have an A in English. I usually got like a B." Tucker was thrilled to hear about his A.

"It made me feel like I did matter to him and every little bit helped," she said. "We all like to help, but we don't all get to see what happens when you cast your bread upon the waters, and seeing Monique every morning and knowing that this helped a little bit just made me feel good. And we haven't had a lot of joy, and so taking those bits of joy, those are very fulfilling."

Sparks says Cameron has opened up more since working with Tucker. "It reflects in his grades; it reflects in his insight," she said. "He can now respond to people he's never seen before. . . . She made him so much more comfortable. They would have long conversations. I would come home and say, 'Who are you talking to?' and he'd say, 'Ms. Tucker!' It was a tutoring for my son, but also a mentoring." Among other things, it has made Cameron think more about what he might do beyond basketball. Tucker is encouraging him to start writing letters to colleges now, an approach Sparks hadn't thought about.

"She's almost encouraging him without him realizing she's encouraging him," Sparks said. "It's awesome."

The program is still a fledgling one; besides Tucker, just two other Ingleside residents are involved, but Parsons said the facility plans to ramp it up in 2021. Ingleside residents have a history of volunteerism, including a relationship with Academy of Hope adult schooling, which they used to do in person before the pandemic. Jesus Huamani, a certified nursing assistant at Ingleside's Westminster at Lake Ridge site in Virginia, signed up two months ago when she was having trouble helping her sons Nicolas, 14, and Gonzalo, 12, keep up with their reading.

"Since I don't speak English fluently, I thought it would be a good thing if someone who speaks good English could help them," said Huamani, who lives in Woodbridge, Va.

Now, her sons log in once a week to meet with two residents where their mother works, Bill Spengler, 82, and Mary Allen Sawtelle, 78. Spengler is a retired chemical engineer, and Sawtelle taught French in elementary school 50 years ago. (The two are engaged to be married.)

Spengler works with Nicolas on book reports, helping him expand them from two or three sentences to more fleshed-out work. Sawtelle talks with Gonzalo about Neil deGrasse Tyson and Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

The normally shy Gonzalo has been eager and enthusiastic with Sawtelle, his mother said. It might help that she can bring a personal touch to some of their discussions about public figures; her son-in-law clerked under Ginsburg, and once, when she was a child, she met Albert Einstein.

"I had a great uncle who was a professor at Princeton, and we were visiting. We spotted a man walking along with a little white poodle, and my uncle said, 'Go chat with that man,' and so I did, and later I learned it was Albert Einstein," she said. Gonzalo told her that he would have liked to meet Einstein, too.

Tucker said the program "has given me, believe me, more than it has given Cameron." She also loves that she can directly give back to someone who is so helpful to her and other residents. They can go to Sparks for anything from a computer cable to a dinner delivery, and she is always in the lobby to greet them. "Everyone knows Monique, and she knows all of our names," Tucker said. "There's a lot of gray-hairs with lots of masks, but Monique knows everybody."

Program participants say they plan to keep partaking in it for the foreseeable future. "We're beginning to know them, as well as to help them," Spengler said. "I'm sure we'll continue." And someday, they hope they have a chance to stand in front of the people whose faces and stories they have come to know.

"I'd love to meet him," Tucker said of Cameron. "I want to see his big, tall self, and I'm hoping that he'll go to college, and I'll be able to come to his graduation."