

Enter The Mentor

And exit the student's confusion about whether "somebody cares about me."

On a humid spring afternoon in an impoverished neighborhood of San Antonio, 14-year-old Juan picks up the phone to call Paul Ringenbach, company historian and assistant vice president of USAA, a highly respected insurance and financial services firm.

Juan isn't doing research for a Boy Scout project, or even looking for a part-time job. What he wants from Ringenbach—his mentor for the last seven years—is some advice about a minor problem with his schoolwork.

Meanwhile, in a conference room on USAA's picturesque, 268-acre corporate campus, Jessica Garcia, a high school senior, is examining architectural renderings that show how an abandoned building near downtown might be rehabilitated. John Krause, an architect and the construction project manager for USAA, is helping Jessica hone her communications skills for a presentation that would raise funds for the renewal effort. Judy Hooper, administrator of the Gifted/Talented Program for San Antonio's Northside Independent School District, sits in, taking notes assiduously.

These are not your typical snapshots of corporate life.



But then, San Antonio-based United Services Automobile Association is not your typical corporation. These are but two examples of USAA's astoundingly successful mentoring program, launched eight years ago by Gen. Robert McDermott, then CEO, and expanded with the blessing and committed oversight of retired Gen. Robert Herres, who became CEO in 1993 after 36 years with the Air Force. Such outreach initiatives, of course, are not unknown in corporate America. With the best of intentions, many companies will, for example, send staffers to a local school once a month to talk about how balancing a departmental budget is like balancing your checkbook, or about how making widgets helps fuel the global economy. Yet USAA's approach is far more exten-

sive, seeking one-on-one mentoring relationships between employees and students that start early and, wherever possible, last for several years.

Both as a parent and as a military man, Herres has worked with his share of motivated young people. Sitting in his office, surrounded by artwork depicting the American West, he reflects on his hope that USAA's widely praised

Photo courtesy of USAA © 1996



Those who can, do. And at USAA, those who can, teach, too.

mentoring initiatives will help raise the next generation of good citizens.

"We've got so many problems in finding ways to help children prepare for their adult life that I think everybody ought to latch onto something," Herres says. "A lot of money has been thrown at our social problems for years, so we know a lot of things don't work, or just have marginal benefit. But this program works."

To say the least, tangible results have been achieved. Dropout rates, dangerously high in some San Antonio schools, have been almost zero among students who have received mentoring from USAA employees. The program, which grew from two to 10 schools and from 60 to 875 mentors under McDermott, now involves 14 schools and 1,091 mentors—USAA employees all. Eager to share a good thing with like-minded organizations, USAA has sold the concept to 27 other San Antonio-area companies and—not surprisingly, given its strong ties to the armed services—five military bases. All told, more than 2,100 mentors live and work in greater San Antonio.

The secret to success? Well, Herres the business executive sees the issue in management as well as human terms.

"With mentoring, it's instilling the

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belief in a child that 'somebody cares about me,'" he says passionately. "Almost every one of the mentors I've talked to says the very same thing. It works because the mentor cares about what kind of adult that child is going to be. Students know these are people who are volunteering to come into the classroom and spend time with them, and thus, they're exposed to caring about their future."

Befitting its special method of

community outreach, USAA is a unique entity in corporate America. Founded in 1922 as an insurance provider for active and retired military officers, it is today one of the nation's largest home and auto insurers; its 80 subsidiaries and affiliates own and manage over \$37.7 billion in assets. Not a traditional for-profit corporation, it is self-defined as a "reciprocal inter-insurance exchange," where members insure one another and share in profits.

USAA is obviously doing something right. In 1993, Herres' first year as CEO, the company was listed in the top five of "The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America." And there are probably some students and parents around who would happily second that motion and proceed to honor Herres himself.

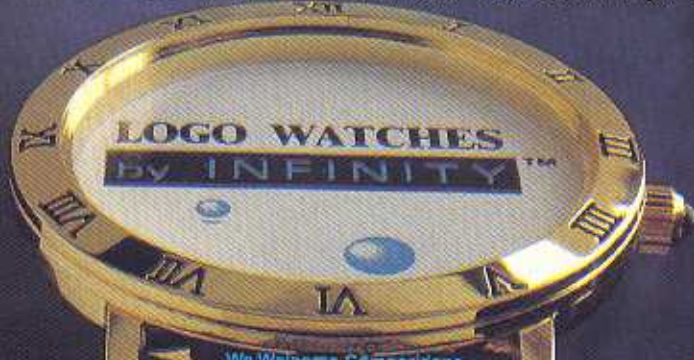
His distinguished career in military and civilian life speaks of dedication, focus and hard work. Sadly, though, role models who can instill these traits are not found in every setting—a bitter realization that was a major force behind the start-up of USAA's mentoring effort.

Reaching young people confused about their future is not a new experience for the 63-year-old Herres, whose tenure in Air Force blue included a stint with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and charge of the entire Eighth Air Force.

"When I was a wing commander running a military base with a lot of families, many domestic problems came to my desk," he says. "Plus, throughout your military career, you find yourself working with young people right out of high school—most of whom are in their first phase of adult employment. You have ultimate responsibility for training programs, so a lot of things rub off on you."

Still, some of the approaches to

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Heroes In Our Time

motivation and training that work in the military wouldn't be appropriate for mentoring young people in civilian life. As Herres notes, "A program has to manifest itself by showing that the older generation *does* care, but that doesn't mean by dominating and dictating."

Herres was already on the USAA board when McDermott started the mentoring program, and he was an early supporter. "We simply said, 'We have to do this,'" Herres recalls. "We started with one school at a time, and through his [McDermott's] efforts, we expanded it by incentivizing others in the community."

Occasionally, Herres makes time in a busy schedule to visit USAA-mentored schools. He's also involved with young people as a member of Junior Achievement's national board and chairman of its South Texas chapter. He sees the two undertakings as different in focus but united in their goal.

"A mentor reaches one child, while Junior Achievement reaches 25 or 30 kids at one time," he points out. "Junior Achievement is not going to reach the particularly troubled child, but the beauty of the mentoring program is in its simplicity."

Like places all across the American landscape, portions of metropolitan San Antonio, Texas' third-largest city, bear daily witness to many of the tragic social problems of our time. Yet rather than adopt a duck-and-run approach, Herres views this reality as a powerful argument for mentoring.

"No one person is going to make a difference in this world," he says, "but some can play roles. In mediating these social problems, you've got to look for the thing you can do, given the resources you have."

For USAA, the resources include considerable brainpower. And with 11,000 employees in San Antonio

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(16,500 worldwide), the talent pool is especially deep and wide. A common scenario involves matching a student with a mentor who has similar interests and skills. That's why Jessica Garcia, who hopes to become



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an architect, was teamed with Krause, USAA's staff liaison to independent contractors that work on architectural, construction and engineering tasks on the corporate campus.

The benefits of the mentoring program actually go both ways. Disillusionment about the younger generation—a common feeling among older adults—can be dissipated by the direct involvement mentoring provides, says Herres. "Once their kids grow up, some adults get disconnected from the school system. Then, when bond issues necessary to provide things for the school system come up for a vote, these people opt out. But the people who do the mentoring learn that most young people are not juvenile delinquents. Like their own children, most want affection, and want people to care about them."

Russell Shaw is a business journalist based in Marietta, Georgia.

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