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Mentor keeps eight-year lunch date

Ted Riley has met with boy since first grade, eating lunch and lending an ear

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Eight years ago, a teacher at A.C. Moore Elementary School in Columbia called a family friend, Ted Riley, with a challenge.

How about becoming a mentor, the educator asked Riley.

The sales pitch appealed to Riley's sense of community service and his upbringing, so he agreed to work with James Nixon, a quiet, shy first-grader.

James is still quiet and shy -- at least around adults he doesn't know. More importantly, he and Riley are still a team.

"I grew up in public life but never served as a public servant," said Riley, the youngest son of former S.C. Gov. Dick Riley.

"If I can get involved in one person's life and change it for the better, that's important to me."

Riley, 37, and James, now 14 and an eighth-grader at Hand Middle School, meet weekly. James gives up lunch and recess with friends to visit with Riley, an attorney still building a law firm he co-founded in August 2001.

"He's nice," said James, a young man of few words.

Riley mainly lends an attentive ear to James, who takes advanced placement courses and follows USC's sports teams closely.

Between visits, the two exchange e-mails and James occasionally calls Riley at home for help with homework.

"He's pretty good at math," James said.

When meeting in Hand's resource center, Riley and James spend time together playing card games. James seems to win most of the hands.

"I say it's luck," Riley said with a wry grin. "He says it's skill. I think it's a little bit of both."

However, their get-togethers aren't limited to one-hour visits at school.

Riley has taken James to museums, to the circus, to the library and to see his beloved Gamecocks play football and basketball. James doesn't remember seeing the teams lose in person.

"Maybe we need to take you more often," Riley joked.

Riley's dedication to James hasn't escaped the notice of educators.

"If we could get more business people like that involved with our kids in public schools, we would see a difference in our children. No question," A.C. Moore principal Cynthia Detuelo said.

"Ted will be part of James' life for a long, long time," predicts Belinda Rogers, the Communities-in-Schools coordinator at Hand Middle. "I just have a feeling."

Ivy Bratton, James' mother, appreciates Riley's dedication.

"It's an opportunity for your child to have someone other than a parent to encourage them and have a friend," Bratton said. "They need somebody they can trust. He trusts Ted."

When Riley joined the mentor program, he was newly married. Today, he and his wife, Nancy, have four children. Riley carries around a picture of James with his four children. James is beaming.

"He told James -- I thought this was so sweet -- 'One day I want you to be my child's mentor,'" said Bratton.

Others note James has known Riley more than half his life.

"I decided early on that if I'm going to do it, I'm going to stick with it as long as he'll have me," Riley said.

"I got into this to be a friend ... to let him know someone is there weekly and will be there for as long as he wants," Riley said.

Bratton credits Riley with playing an influential role in her son's maturation.

"He tells (James) he can be whatever he wants to be. Kids need to hear that from other people, not just a mom and dad," she said.

Riley encourages James to consider parlaying his interest in math into a career like engineering. James said he'd someday like to design cars. He has no interest in law, however.

"Too much stress for me," James said.

Riley laughed.

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