

North State Parent magazine



Be the Change – Melissa Mendonca, Tehama County

by Jamie Weil



Melissa Mendonca is no stranger to mentoring.

Born and raised in Chico, Mendonca warmly remembers how her Notre Dame School fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Beyers, and principal, Sister Jane Golden, uncovered talents in her she didn't know she had. Both women gave her the sense that she was special by showing her how to develop her strengths. They invited her to come to school early to work on her speaking skills. They encouraged her to enter essay contests, building her skills and confidence as a writer.

Mendonca is currently the coordinator of the Tehama Mentoring Program—a natural way for her to "pay it forward." She began as a mentor there five years ago. "Melissa has grown the program tremendously," says Maureen Greer, who became a mentor at the same time as Mendonca. "She connects people and blazes new territory in mentoring relationships."

The Tehama Mentoring Program offers a number of different mentoring avenues, such as one-on-one mentoring, group mentoring, lunch buddies, academic mentoring, and unique cross-age mentoring where high school students meet at supervised school sites with elementary-age children.

"Mentoring is magical," says Mendonca. "Cross-age mentoring is particularly magical. When the high school student walks onto the school site, we wish we could just harness the coolness," she laughs.

Mendonca believes we are all searching for an opportunity to give back. In the fourth grade, she remembers longing to be in the Peace Corps to travel the world helping others. Following high school, she could barely wait to get started. "I had wanderlust in my heart," says Mendonca.

At California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly), her favorite class was African History. After an eclectic undergraduate education at a variety of schools, followed by the time in the Peace Corps she had dreamed about as a young girl, Mendonca settled in Zambia, Africa. There she was finishing a Masters Degree in Public Health from Tulane University, and had planned to stay.



In 2001, a major event altered her course back to the North State. Her father became terminally ill, and she journeyed home. Mendonca felt deeply in her heart that the North State was where she needed to be.

In the process of re-rooting in Red Bluff, Mendonca viewed the community she had left with new eyes. She felt community support and saw the potential to apply all she had learned while away. In a place she couldn't wait to leave when she was younger, she found home.

With gentle humility, Mendonca works tirelessly for change. On a policy level, she has been appointed by the Board of Supervisors to the Tehama County Public Health Advisory Board to address public health issues in Tehama County, and to the Community Action Agency to address issues of poverty in Tehama County. She is a member of the Tehama County Arts Council as well as the Police Activities League.

Our Be the Change column mission is to feature those, especially from the North State, who are actively making a difference in the lives of children and families. If you would like to nominate someone who is making a difference, please write to editorial@northstateparent.com .

She continues to be a mentor. "Whereas policy positions can be broad, mentoring affects an individual life. Both are important," says Mendonca.

While a one-on-one relationship is really intended to help a child, Mendonca knows first-hand the positive impact mentoring makes on an adult. When she herself took home her first mentoring application, she held onto it for about a year, wanting to be sure she could commit. When the timing was right, she was interviewed and matched with a 13 year-old girl whom she mentored for five years.

Mendonca is currently an academic mentor to a new mentee, and they are focusing on the mentee going to college. Academic mentoring guides a student through the educational process, an especially vital link for students with family members not familiar with the college admissions process.

Mentor Maureen Greer is trying something new with her mentee of the past five years: together they are mentoring a younger mentee. "It takes so little to make such a huge impact. I'm really seeing how much my first mentee was listening by the things she says to our new mentee," says Greer.

Mendonca, a modern day hero, is a poignant example of her own life philosophy. "Do something. Life is really, truly a series of little steps over time that make a difference."

To arrange to be a mentor or a mentee contact Melissa Mendonca at the Tehama County Department of Education, (530) 528-7358. You can learn more about the mentoring program at www.tehamamentoring.org.



Children's author Jamie Weil mentors kids wherever she finds them and is called Momma Weil by her children's friends.