

Mentoring:

A Two Way Learning Experience

By Melody Finnemore



www.northwest.construction.com

Mike Purcell is part of a program that helps teach Portland area youth about all types of business, not just the construction industry.

Mentors teach their partners about specific industries and business skills, while the students earn their GED.

Mike Purcell is the first to admit he underestimated the impact of being a mentor, both on himself and on Darnell Jones, the young man he meets with once a month to discuss business development strategies.

Purcell, president and senior estimator at Gray Purcell Inc., a

Portland construction company, volunteers through Portland YouthBuilders. Founded in 1995, the alternative high school provides educational, vocational and leadership training to about 100 low-income, high-risk young teens ranging in age from 17-24.

The Portland non-profit organization initiated a mentorship program to provide support for its graduates. By linking successful graduates with professionals in their chosen fields, the PYB mentor program helps young people fulfill their personal and professional goals and dreams.

Purcell said the mentorship program is an opportunity to learn as well as teach.

Q: How did you get involved with Portland YouthBuilders?

A: I joined the Board of Directors about 10 years ago. It's a great group of people and I feel privileged to be one of them. We've learned a lot over the years, and we're able to offer a mentorship program that is a major, life-changing event for people who have made mistakes and want to do something with their lives. It's a tremendous responsibility because it could be their one shot or they could end up in the justice system for the rest of their lives.

Q: Why do you feel it's important to serve as a mentor?

A: It's an outgrowth of being the owner of a company that has a certain amount of success and wanting to pass that knowledge and experience on to others. You have to have a passion for it, though. If you don't like going to work everyday and like what you do, go find somewhere else to volunteer.



Mike Purcell, President of Gray-Purcell Construction, Portland.

Q: Talk about your work with Darnell Jones.

A: Right now we're in the early stages and are just getting to know each other and trust each other. One of the things we did before we even met was make a list of our interests. He's big into sports and I'm a huge sports fan. Surprisingly, I'm matched with someone who isn't necessarily interested in construction. He's interested in being an entrepreneur.

He has proposals he wants to run by me, and I'm trying to provide realistic responses to those initiatives and temper them with real-world experience. I've been in business for myself for a number of years, so I try to share with him some of my mistakes.

Q: What do you hope to teach him?

A: Attitude – it's all about having a positive attitude. He's experienced a lot of life for a 24-year-old, so I'm trying to teach him some of the age-old axioms like never giving up. I'm also trying to teach him some of the techniques and tricks of the trade about doing business so you don't get sacked by some oversight.

Q: What have you learned through the process?

A: I've learned how important and what a responsibility it is. Through training I've learned the potential affect I can have on my mentoree and that I need to be careful in my approach because of that impact.

In spite of all the stereotypes, I'm amazed at how resilient people are in the face of negative life events. It's a pleasant surprise. It's also really fun to guide a young person through the mine-field of owning your own business.

Q: Did you have a mentor? What were the most important things she or he taught you?

A: One of the people who most affected me in terms of my career was a homebuilder who lived down the street when I was growing up. He made a huge impact on me.

I grew up in the Catholic school system until the ninth grade and I had my first non-nun teacher in the seventh grade. He taught science, and he inspired me to learn about science and get an engineering degree.

I was a bit of a lost soul when my parents moved to Portland because I didn't know anyone, so I got involved in Junior Achievement.. That's what inspired me to own my own business. Until then I figured I was destined to work in the same place for 30 years like my father. But that experience made me think, "Hey, I can own my own business. That can happen." <<