



## **Ten Years of Coaching**

**By Mat Kretzer**

Daniel, my only child, is six years old. There are two things that constantly surprise me about him. One is how much he has to learn. My wife, Mary, had to explain to him the meaning of "one-way ticket" this morning so he could understand one of the scenes in a Scooby Doo video. He still doesn't know all the letters of the alphabet. The other thing that amazes me about Daniel is how headstrong he is. He doesn't like to be taught anything by me—reading, writing, swimming or bow and arrow shooting. Reading and writing he just doesn't want to do (or at least not when I want him to). He's quite confident he knows more than me about swimming and archery. I can't even get him to try a vegetable. And it's not easy tricking him into thinking he's having fun playing a game rather than learning something I want him to know.

So, that brings me to Tariq, my College Bound Foundation student. Farley Neuman from CBF introduced us 10 years ago, when Tariq was 6. I had virtually no experience with children other than having been a 6-year-old myself. I had no children of my own and hadn't spent any significant time around my nephews and nieces. I volunteered with a vague hope that I would get a sense of accomplishment from helping a child in need. I'm a very academic sort of fellow, so I felt that I should have a lot to offer an underprivileged kid. Maybe I would also learn something of life on the other side of the tracks.

Tariq liked being read to, but he didn't like me trying to teach him to read. And he was very headstrong. One day he was trying to put a puzzle together by taking one piece out of the box, trying to fit it with a second piece, then returning the second piece to the box and trying a third piece. When I suggested he dump all the pieces on the floor he told me, "The people that

do these puzzles don't do it that way." He stuck to his method until another 6-year-old came over and dumped all the pieces out.

Now I understand that Tariq's lack of knowledge and willfulness were just part of being a 6-year-old boy. In addition, Tariq's environment didn't help much. In the early days, he never knew I was coming over until I showed up. Neither did his foster mother, in spite of the fact that I showed up on the same day at the same time every week. They just didn't live by clocks and calendars. I finally learned to call before going over to make sure he would actually be there.

I've seen Tariq a couple of hours a week for 10 years. I've always tried to do some reading, writing and arithmetic with him. He's always resisted. He eventually did learn to read and write, with (or in spite of) my help. He's pretty good at math (definitely in spite of my help). I often wonder what effect I have had on him, although I now I taught him at least one thing. He recently blew his nose and then looked up at me and said, "You taught me to do that." When he was 6, he didn't know he could do anything other than sniffle and let his nose drip.

It was easy for me to become frustrated because my efforts to help him academically never worked to my satisfaction. But we've enjoyed riding bikes, working on projects and eating hamburgers together. And we've both broadened our horizons by getting to know some of each other's family, friends and lives. Tariq is still in high school and does not have any trouble with the law.

I have only seen Tariq, now a 16 year old, a couple of times in the last 6 months. I went to a meeting held by his social worker to start preparing him for his emancipation from foster care. He told me he would call and come over again, but he delayed for weeks until he visited last weekend. I fear he's gotten to the age where he doesn't want to spend his Saturdays with a 58 year old who harangues him to read and write.

It's difficult to measure success, but I know I did expose him to my family, my life, and my aspirations for work and education. I hope I've helped him understand as much about my life and way of doing things as he helped me understand his.

If you are thinking of becoming a tutor and you haven't dealt with children recently, you've probably got a lot to learn about young kids. They're a willful bunch. Ask any parent. And their parents won't necessarily make things easy for you. But, with any luck, you'll teach your student something, show him something of your life and learn a bit about his. Don't forget to have some fun while doing it. And remember, some of life's small lessons (like how to blow your nose) can have a big impact.