

Mario Cordova – PASS AmeriCorps Mentor

As a 2nd year PASS AmeriCorps member, I already knew what to expect from the program. Yet looking back at both of my years of unforgettable service, the only way I could really shed some insight about my school site, Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School, and the PASS program as a whole, is to start at the beginning. Back to the time when I was anxious to find out where my school site would be. Back to the time when I was just like you; fresh faced, naive and a bit worried!

What I was being asked to do in the PASS AmeriCorps program wasn't something easy, much less with a population of students that had been shunned by their schools, potentially gotten in to gangs or drugs, or just plain given up on. To somehow interject in to their lives, befriend them and create some sort of positive change for their future, is and was, the most difficult task any one person could undertake. Luckily, I was never alone on this journey; the PASS AmeriCorps program supervisors and co-workers were some of the most supportive and caring staff I have ever had the pleasure of working with. But to be a positive role model, a Mentor, does not come with a set of instructions.

It was a challenge right of the bat to fill the shoes of the past Mentor that I had never met. The PASS room, the walls, the cabinets and the drawers were warmed by the memories, successes and familiarities of a person I could not get to greet. The students and staff were clearly embossed by a person that seemed bigger than life. The first few weeks were the worst; living in the shadow of a person that affected so many, of a person that I had not yet become, was tough. Nonetheless, in time, the students and staff greeted me with open arms and getting to know the students was top priority while that looming shadow of Mr. Past Mentor seemed to slowly fade away.

Establishing relationships with the students came in either two speeds, surprising because I thought getting to know them would be equally difficult across the board. Some students would take to me almost instantly while others felt to despise me during our one-on-one sessions. I quickly learned, however, that it wasn't me that they glared at; it was the idea of me. The idea of a person that was trying to care for them, like so many in other adults in the past whom had filled that spot, only to leave them high and dry. Only to hurt them with empty words and promises, or sometimes hurt them with no words at all. Every student was different; each and every one had their own story, their own style, their own strut and it was my duty to recognize that. It was my duty to be sensitive to their needs and offer my help in whatever form they required. Academic support, moral support, friendship, or even tough-love were some of the many caps I wore as Mentor; each one different, each one important and each one special.

The students' success, shortcomings, mistakes, arguments, friendships, all felt like my own. It was impossible not to get emotionally invested with all my students; it was part of being a mentor, I felt like. Thankfully, however, this gave my 1st year of service structure. I thought out, planned and facilitated lessons and conversations on the issues I watched the students go through, on the issues that were relevant to them. There were plenty of ups and there were plenty of downs, nevertheless I strived on, and the 11 month contract quickly came to a close faster that you can imagine.

I cannot emphasize this enough but being a 'veteran' in the program made my 2nd term of service a breeze. I had been through a lot in my first year, including the shock of a student whom took his own life toward the end of the second school semester. I had

seen, experienced and felt what seemed like a lifetime in a matter of months. I was more than ready for my 2nd term of service. I was well grounded with the students and staff and I was integrated in the school life. Giving presentations in classrooms, playing in the school band and partaking in a lot of school activities, like staff vs. student day, had made me popular on campus. I said 'hi' to more faces than I knew and I was willing to help every single one of them. I wasn't limited to just PASS during my 2nd term, I was everywhere: ASB, Avid, Band, P.E., in classrooms; I was everywhere! I was more than fond of my school site and I spent my days having as much fun as I could during the school day.

This is not to say that I was slacking on my mentoring, I was just so comfortable with making and cultivating caring relationships with students and staff that it had become second nature. I could make friends, offer services and be all over campus seamlessly. I would attribute these skills to the great people I worked with, staff, supervisors and my co-workers that would always offer their support and insight whenever I needed it. Obviously my 2nd term still had its own different challenges that would test me in their own ways. There were still days that I felt like my conversations and lessons had had no effect on my students. There were still days that a large number of students would get suspended over drugs, or not show up to school, or simply just defy all the teachers and staff. There were days that I was just frustrated about everything. This time around, though, I knew how to deal with it. I knew what to do, who to seek for more support, and what to say. I was for all intents and purposes a true 'veteran', hardened by the experiences of the year prior in the most positive of ways.

Though simple in concept, going from stranger to Mentor in a matter of a school year in the lives of so many students was my greatest accomplishment. In between the roller coaster of emotions, the frustrations, the school activities, the paperwork, and my duties to the program I don't think there could have been any other way I would have wanted to spend my post undergraduate life. Teaching, serving and helping youth has been one of the greatest experiences that I will cherish for many years to come. Thank you PASS AmeriCorps program for giving me such a priceless and challenging memory that I will never forget. Thank you.

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