

*A father of the fatherless,
a defender of widows.* Psalm 68:5a
Mentorship programs at CC San Luis
Obispo and other Calvary Chapels
enrich children and their families.

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When 10-year-old Natalia Zuniga entered Pastor James Rey's office at Calvary San Luis Obispo, CA (known as "Calvary SLO"), he could tell she was a special, well-loved little girl by the way she held her daddy's hand and the bond that they had between them. But James also knew that Natalia had been only 3 when her mom died, and that her father and older brothers couldn't really nurture her properly in feminine ways. So Eppy Zuniga turned to Calvary SLO's new mentorship program, Big Buddies, to bridge the gap for his precious daughter. The program is for ages 6 to 17.

"Her dad was so caring that he wanted somebody to show her womanly things," James said. "His desire was for his daughter to be exposed to a Christian woman so she could be a godly influence."

Now 13, Natalia has had a blast with her Big Buddy, Jaime. For two years, they got together every couple of weeks. Jaime taught her how to do her hair and put on makeup, they enjoyed tea parties and gatherings with

BIG BUDDIES



Big Buddy Aaron Wise and Little Buddy Tristan take a spin around the racetrack.

Kristin Wetmore, left, former match specialist of Calvary San Luis Obispo's Big Buddies program, enjoys a day with Little Buddies Tristan, foreground, Deja, and Myles, right,

program, enjoys a day with Little Buddies Tristan, foreground, Deja, and Myles, right, children they mentor meet for a day of games and fun.

other mentors and mentees at summer and Christmas events. Most importantly, Jaime strengthened Natalia's Christian walk by serving as a good role model, James said. But not all of the Little Buddies come from Christian homes.

Big Buddies began three years ago with college students at Calvary SLO, who provided temporary mentorship to children of the church's single moms and from Hawthorne Elementary School where the church met on Sundays. Later, the program became formalized, as rigorous training was provided by a local family support services agency, the Family Care Network, and Big Buddies opened to the entire community. Kirt Collins, principal of Hawthorne Elementary, matches his at-risk students with the Big Buddies program at Calvary SLO, as well as with his own church that runs a Big Buddies program.

"Kirt is a great brother in the Lord," James said. The pastor and the principal knew the Lord had His hand on Big Buddies when, right from the beginning, one of the mentors at Calvary SLO stepped up and asked for Collins' toughest case.

Big Buddy Mike had been mentored as a kid and knew what it was like to be a little lost soul in need of an older, loving hand. He was matched with 9-year-old Demetrius.

"Demetrius was getting into fights in school," James recalled. "At the time, he was having significant personal issues. His real dad was out of the picture, and his mom's boyfriend was put in prison the week that we were matching the child."

Demetrius was also failing out of school. But by Mike being consistent with his time and dealing with behavioral issues in a loving way, the once troubled lad developed into one of Hawthorne Elementary School's top students.

“It was almost too good to be true,” Pastor James said. “He was headed in the wrong direction and his life was turned around by mentoring.” Demetrius eventually moved to Northern California, as his father came back into his life, but not before Mike sent him off with a package of his favorite candy, Razzles.

“It’s that kind of consistency that makes this program work,” James said. “It’s the little things that kids just soak up because they are longing for someone to care about them. Not that their families don’t care, but circumstances being what they are ... we can connect them with people who have the heart to say, ‘Hey, I want to spend time with you consistently.’” Currently, Calvary SLO’s program has eight children matched with mentors, but the need is greater.

Family services statistics show that one in four children in America (about 25 million children) grow up without a father in the home. More than 75 percent of prison inmates come from father-absent homes. Much of the problem of school dropouts, drug addictions, criminal behavior, and unwed pregnancies can be traced to the absence of a healthy father-child relationship in the home.

Cason could have been one of those statistics if his mom hadn’t been so diligent about getting him and her three other children into the mentorship program after their father abandoned their Christian home. His mom, Chantelle Nakasawa, has been thankful for the connection Big Buddies has made with her children. “The program was an answer to prayer,” Chantelle said. Around the time his dad left, Cason, now 11, started getting into fights in school and hanging out with the wrong crowd. Adam became Cason’s Big Buddy and was able to steer him back on track.

“I think it’s pretty cool to have someone to express my feelings to and have him as an older brother,” Cason said. “It’s just the joy of having someone else older than you to be able to talk to, someone you can tell your secrets to, and he won’t tell anyone. He’s helped me realize that some of the bad things I’d done, like fights in school, are not the best choices, and I should read my Bible more.” Cason’s brothers and sisters—Chaile, 15; Maelen, 14; and Tristan, 9—also enjoy Big Buddies. All four children are excellent musicians, which they showcased at last year’s Big Buddies talent show.



Calvary SLO Big Buddy Adam Nixon enjoys lunch with his Little Buddy, Cason, whose brother and two sisters are in the mentorship program.

“I think they just relate to the kids who are older than them,” said Chantelle. “When they see a college-age student taking an interest in them, that really does a lot for them. They see how well these guys are doing and look forward to achieving something like that themselves one day.

“It just comes back to God being so big,” she continued. “It’s not fun being a single mom ... when my husband left, I never said I don’t have someone to provide because God said He is the ultimate Provider.”

Pastor James can personally relate to losing a parent since he lost his father at age 19. “I was older, in college, but I know what it is like to miss a parent who is not there anymore,” he said. James believes that the verse that best applies to Big Buddies is Matthew 5:15: “Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house.” It is not only the children being impacted for Christ by the mentorship program but their families.

Jeff Little, a 26-year-old deacon of the church, appreciates the training that went into his becoming a Big Buddy. He said the extensive training provided by the Family Care Network is what makes the program a success. “They spent hours building up the curriculum,” Jeff said. “It’s a great foundation.”

Other mentorship programs

“Mentorship programs have been growing throughout the Calvary Chapel movement,”

Juergen Kneifel said. He runs a program called Mission to Mentor that not only provides mentorship to children at Calvary Fellowship in Mountlake Terrace, WA, just north of Seattle, but also trains other churches that want to mentor youth. The Christian Association of Youth Mentoring designed the curriculum.

Juergen helped CC St. Petersburg, FL, start its flourishing mentorship program two years ago as an offshoot of its Angel Tree prison ministry. Since then, CC St. Pete’s program has grown to 40 kids.

“The Christian Association of Youth Mentoring was so helpful to make sure that every mentor has a supervisor,” said Kathy Lee, ministry overseer of CC St. Pete’s mentorship program. “The supervisors are a liaison between the family and the mentor. They keep in touch on a monthly basis to make sure everything is going okay. And if any problems come up, they address them.” Kathy said she expects CC St. Pete’s mentorship program to grow because the need for it is so great.

In October 2008, the church also helped other mentorship programs develop by hosting the Christian Association of Youth Mentorship’s Annual Conference. Seventy representatives from churches throughout the country attended, including Calvary Chapels in Long Island and New Mexico. Juergen organized the conference with volunteers from CC St.

Pete; he had previously organized the 2007 conference at his own church.

“For anyone who wants a mentorship ministry, tools are available,” Juergen said. “They don’t need to reinvent the wheel. But they do have to make sure that they follow what the industry considers to be the best

practices, such as fingerprinting and FBI background checks.”

Juergen continued, “The training is so important because you’re dealing with the wounds of abandonment. When these kids hear about a loving heavenly Father, they think of their earthly father, and a relationship that might not have been loving at all.”



Big Buddy Aaron Wise plays an arcade game with his Little Buddy Tristan, Cason’s brother.

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