

ON MENTORING—AND COMING BACK

During the University of Louisville men's basketball team's recent run to the NCAA championship the world at large was inspired by the grace and inner strength of Kevin Ware, the substitute guard who suffered a broken leg during the regional final. It is hoped that Kevin will recover quickly from the injury and return soon to normal activities. Yet what at times has been lost in the story is the role that teammate Luke Hancock played at the moment of the injury. As Kevin Ware lay on the floor in shock, Luke Hancock immediately came over and said a brief prayer while gently touching the chest of his fallen teammate. The simple and heartfelt gesture was exactly what was needed for Ware to shift into "Kevin mode," the upbeat attitude which helped inspire the UL team to the title. It has struck me that at that moment in time Luke Hancock served as a mentor for Kevin Ware. Having experienced a lengthy rehab from shoulder surgery, Luke Hancock could readily relate to what Kevin Ware was going through and in turn provide reassurance to Kevin. And one need only watch the play of Luke Hancock from that point on to say that he also served as a mentor for his teammates in their drive to the championship.

I suspect all of us remember situations where we have benefited by having someone show us the way during a difficult time in our lives. And all too often when we need guidance the issues are not nearly as obvious as what happened to Kevin Ware. During my years at Seneca High School I would probably not have been identified as being in crisis. I was quiet and kept my grades up. I didn't smoke, drink, or use drugs. Though not considered part of any clique of students, as a rule I was not excluded from group activities. Yet once I left school to go home life was a challenge. When I was in the ninth grade my father became totally and permanently disabled from his job, forcing my mother into the work force at a wage less than half of what my father had earned. Over the next four years my father had several lengthy hospital stays, including three stays at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota totaling seven weeks, eight weeks, and ten weeks. Practically speaking, my mother was a single parent who was overwhelmed by the stress she was under and who at times looked to me for emotional support. There simply was not enough emotional space for me to deal effectively with the issues all teenagers face (which include acne, dating, and simply wanting to fit in). I remember adults that knew my family often asking me how my father was doing. Yet few people would ask me how my mother was doing. And NO ONE ever asked me how my brother and I were getting along.

Over the years as I have reconnected with old classmates I have learned that many others experienced significant difficulties during their high school years. There have been stories of divorce, alcoholism, money problems within families, and for boys the ominous shadow of potentially being drafted into the armed forces to fight a war overseas. I was by no means unique relative to my peers. Virtually all of us could have benefited from having someone outside who was willing to listen and support us in our struggles. It seems to me that while a great deal of time is spent by educators and government alike trying to raise standardized test scores, not nearly enough time is spent addressing the emotional health

of students. And so, in the last year, I returned to Seneca High School and offered to serve as a mentor within the school.

Upon completing a background check and attending a workshop for prospective mentors, I was assigned to work with a student currently attending Seneca. Prior to my first visit with the student, I wondered what I should say to him in the way of introduction. Yet when I met him for the first time, the words somehow seemed to come. I told him how like him I had once been a student at Seneca High School. I told him of my struggles as a high school student and how that having someone to talk to would have been of benefit. I told him that I would come on a consistent basis and visit with him if he wanted me to do so. Then I asked him simply this—what (if anything) would he be open to sharing with me.

Over the course of this school year my student and I have visited on a weekly basis. He has shared with me some of the challenges he has faced during high school. He has been very open to me sharing with him my experiences at Seneca both during and after my high school years. He allowed me to provide input on a recent classroom assignment (which led to a healthy and productive discussion about alcohol and drugs). And he has been open to me attending his baseball games at Seneca (where he has been a starter on the varsity squad). At the games I have had the pleasure and privilege of meeting his parents. Once while visiting with his mother at one of the games, she said something that I feel rings true for every young person regardless of their situation. She said that when difficulties arise, young people often have not experienced working through and moving past the issues at hand. She then added that anyone benefits from having others there to provide reassurance that things will be better. This is exactly what Luke Hancock provided for Kevin Ware during the NCAA tournament. At this time I would encourage any alumnus who is able to consider mentoring a student at Seneca. While your efforts may not be on a national stage, you as well as your student may well benefit in more ways than you realize.

Sam Denny (Class of 1969)