

Marblehead's Peer Mentor Program

- Alex Kerai

Every year freshmen come to MHS excited and worried about what the next four years will hold for them. But now, thanks to the Peer Mentor Program developed by guidance counselor Judy Luise, they aren't as nervous. Each year an incoming eighth grader is paired with an upperclassman (a junior or senior) who will be their mentor for the next year. The eighth graders meet their mentors every year during an afternoon in May called "Step-Up Day." The mentees come to MHS for an afternoon that includes meeting their mentor, getting a general tour of the high school, playing games, and watching and listening to some of the best performing arts groups in the school. However, before all of this can happen, the mentors are trained and prepped to assist their mentees in any way they may need. Students go through a rigorous process in order to become a mentor and then lead their mentee through high school.

This year every student who wanted to apply had to be in an orientation group. Ms. Luise discussed with them what it means to be a mentor, the time commitment they will have to give and the qualities that they all should have. Ms. Luise spoke to sixteen groups in one week, meeting with approximately four groups over the course of four days! Students were then told whether or not they made it into the group. If so, they then had to attend a training session led by the Core Group of Mentors during which they learned what they would have to do with their mentees and how to answer any of their mentees questions. After this they were mentors and got their list of mentees.

The main goal of the mentor program is not to be able to put this experience on a college resume, but to introduce a younger student to high school. The goal is to make them feel comfortable in the new environment. Through meeting veteran students of the school, incoming freshmen gain a friend, and maybe an interest in a new school activity.

Ms. Luise likes to explore the program at the end of each year and figure out what she and the mentors did well and what they need to improve. In order to tighten up the program, she did away with mentor-mentee requests because, as she said, "the program is not meant for students to have people they already know as mentees. The mentor program should be used as a way to mix people up." She also developed a new tool that will be implemented this summer among the mentors and Core Group Mentors called tracking forms. Tracking forms require the Core Group Mentors to keep track of the mentors in their color group and make sure they're keeping up with mentees through the summer and through September and October. Another new addition to the program is a table is going to be set up in cooperation with the Social Network Group, where mentors and social network group members can sign up and sit with people who don't have anyone to sit with during lunch. Sign-ups will be posted throughout the school year. Ms. Luise also wants to develop poster boards with GSA, Team Harmony and Student Government that will promote a positive school environment and work to break stereotypes. She said that they will "be visual reminders that you can easily be nice." During my interview with

Ms. Luise these were some of the new expansions that she was excited about for the Peer Mentor Program.

The Core Peer Mentors are the leaders of the leaders. This group of students is trained personally by Ms. Luise and Richard Cohen of School Mediation Associates. This group then trains the mentors during their orientation and is tasked with helping to organize Step-Up Day and go to the middle school to speak with the eighth graders about their transition to the high school. When talking with Ms. Luise she said that she was very proud of the Core Group, calling them the “most fluid and flexible group that we've had in a long time.” The mentors that are part of this program are involved in a variety of activities in the school. It is a very well-rounded group of individuals, a group that, along with the entire mentor program, Ms. Luise says is “succeeding already.” This is a committed and very secure group of 30 students who are all role models in the school. This group helps to shape the Peer Mentor Program, as is seen by the motto of the group for the year: “You are who you are when no one's watching.” That motto was written by Core Group member Seamus Kraft who was a part of the program years ago but whose idea is still be used today. Another theme of the group is to be genuine in actions. Ms. Luise says, “We all pose and act in a certain way, but be genuine with your mentees because you care.” As was seen during the annual Step-Up Day event, the mentors were already being genuine towards their mentees, laughing, and having fun with them, which is the goal of the program: to create this bond between the two students.

Tommy Gabel, a Core Group member, said of the Step-Up Day event: “I think it's a great way for the new students to meet the mentors and get a good feeling for the school before they come here.” That is exactly the kind of thing that Ms. Luise is trying to accomplish each year with the mentor program, get students comfortable and give them someone that will look out for them.

For me, my experience with my mentor was exactly how Ms. Luise would have wanted it to be. My mentor gave me a tour of the high school, showed me all of my classes, kept in touch with me, and he was always there to answer my questions. The funny thing about my mentor and me is that we both had a lot of the same interests, lived near each other and had similar classes at the same time. We would walk to school together some days, we had band together and we did theatre together. In all honesty, he was one of the reasons why I had wanted to join the mentor program. I wanted to give my mentees the same great experience and knowledge that he had given to me. Since he's graduating this Sunday, I wanted to write this last paragraph as a way to thank him one more time for all that he's done for me. So, thank you very much, Max Levine, for being a great mentor and guide for me. You were an incredible mentor for me, and I only hope that I can be as good as you were for me as I will be for my mentees next year.

Alex Kerai is a member of the Core Group of Peer Mentors.