

# Crossing Hennepin, Changing Lives

## *The Basilica's Hennepin Connections program*

**O**N a glorious spring evening in late April, about 15 pairs of college students and their mentors gather at Minneapolis College for the year-end culmination to the Hennepin Connections mentoring program. For this nine-year-old program (a part of The Basilica's St. Vincent de Paul ministry), connecting volunteer mentors with college students who have experienced homelessness or poverty, this April event is hands-down the most wonderful time of the year. The theme of the evening is "Celebration and Gratitude," and you don't need an agenda to figure that out. There are hugs and smiles, laughter, and joy.

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Students and mentors gather at the year-end celebration in April 2023 at Minneapolis College.

BY RICK MOORE

After a meal and a brief meditation, students are given the opportunity to share what Hennepin Connections has meant to them. One by one, they stand up and describe their journeys, as well as the yearlong evolution of the relationships with their mentors. The stories of success and barriers overcome are heartwarming, to say the least. There are poignant, heart-wrenching moments, too, as a student and mentor describe losing loved ones in recent months and needing the extra support that Hennepin Connections provides. Tears of joy and tears of sadness. But throughout the evening, gratitude for the program is universal.

“This year has been really good. ... Everything that I have accomplished, honestly, I owe it to [my mentor],” says a student.

“As a mentor, I get just as much if not more value. ... The inspiration that I get from watching her do what she does, I can’t describe it,” adds her mentor.

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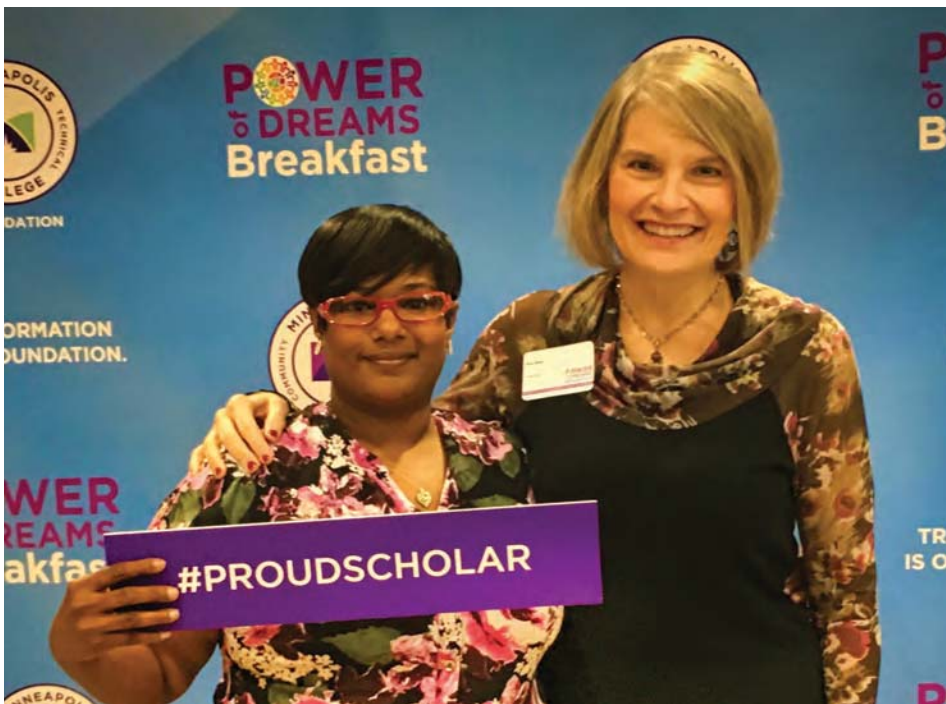
One of the student participants is Byron Jeffery. A native of Houston, Jeffery had to grow up fast. He says he wound up using drugs, getting into trouble with the law, and “making a lot of terrible decisions.” His life there pivoted about seven years ago on a day when he was feeling especially low. He says a neighborhood pastor saw the despair in his eyes and offered this bit of advice: “You want to get out of Houston? Go to Minnesota.”

With a bus ticket in hand, Jeffery headed north and found a new path during six months of treatment at the Salvation Army Adult Rehabilitation Center. Staff there recommended he pursue a higher education and Jeffery says that was “a tune to my ears.” He started at MCTC (now Minneapolis College) in 2017 and earned an associate degree in 2020. He’s now at Metro State and on track to earn a bachelor’s degree in addiction counseling next year.

As he entered Metro State he was paired with Shane Kitzman, his new Hennepin Connections mentor. It took a while for their relationship to gel, but two years hence the two are kindred spirits. Jeffery says he could see the consistency in Kitzman, who models traits like reliability, dependability, and critiquing his own thoughts. Hennepin Connections “has given me a foundation,” says Jeffery. “It gave me roots and wings, and the ability to communicate and know how to ask for help—to seek the right people for the right information.”

Kitzman discovered the mentoring program in a Basilica newsletter in August 2021, just a month prior to being paired with Jeffery. A University of St. Thomas graduate and now corporate communications professional, Kitzman agrees that it took a while to forge a true connection with Jeffery. “And that was understandable,” Kitzman says. “I’m a 35-year-old white Minnesotan. Byron is a 43-year-old Black Texan who didn’t become sober until six years ago. We do, as they say, come from different worlds.”

Their worlds have merged nicely. “I thank God for placing Byron in my life, as he inspires me each and every day,” says Kitzman. “Our relationship is a true two-way street, and I can sincerely say



Deliah Grimes and Ellen Meier

I've learned more from Byron than he has learned from me. I get emotional just thinking about it. He inspires me every day to give my best and to be appreciative of everything God has given us."

Jeffery, the mellow yin to Kitzman's ebullient yang, is just as fond of the program. "Hennepin Connections has helped a lot of people, and I'm one of them," he says. "I went into the program for some support, and I got a lot more than that."

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The origins of Hennepin Connections trace back to about 2012, as The Basilica envisioned another St. Vincent de Paul ministry that would be less about direct service and more life-sustaining and relational. "We wanted to go upstream a bit and do something systemic to change lives," says Janice Andersen, The Basilica's Director of Christian Life, and one of the leaders of the program.

Andersen and others established a relationship with MCTC, across the street from The Basilica. The college has been a phenomenal, supportive partner and helps to find students suitable for the program. (Unfortunately, there is no shortage of students who may qualify, since 10% of students there are homeless or housing insecure.)

The initial framework for the program is still in place. Selected students are required to be in contact with their mentors weekly, with face-to-face meetings twice per month. At the end of the year, students who have



Byron Jeffery and Shane Kitzman

met the requirements and stayed on track academically receive a financial award.

As diverse and unique as the students participating in Hennepin Connections are, so too are the mentors, who bring an impressive range of talents and life experiences. There are teachers and counselors, medical directors, and data scientists.

According to Andersen, the key trait for mentors is a willingness to meet people where they are, and that's much easier said than done. What's easy is to project your own thoughts and opinions on someone else's circumstances. Instead, "there has to be a certain willingness to be uncomfortable and to not think that you have all the answers," she says. "So, there's a certain humility that's required."

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Deliah Grimes is an alum of Hennepin Connections and, like Jeffery, a transplant. She moved to Minnesota from Gary, Indiana, in 2012 and started at MCTC about five years later. And like several other students in the program, she's had to balance classes with both work (she's the program manager at a homeless shelter) and parenthood. Grimes has six children ages 13 to 23, with two sets of twins.

She met her mentor, Ellen Meier, that first year at MCTC. "And that's one of my besties!" Grimes beams. "Ellen became family to me. She's the reason that I am who I am. Because I can call her at any time, when I'm at my lowest, and she's always there to build me back up." Joining the program, she says, "was one of the best decisions I ever made."

Meier, a recently retired teacher, was uncertain what to expect when she first met Grimes, but any trepidation quickly dissolved. "I knew we would find that commonality," she says, "I just didn't think it would happen so quickly."

One moment stands out in her mind. As Grimes was getting ready to speak at a breakfast function at MCTC, she texted Meier to let her know she was feeling apprehensive about the event. "The fact that she trusted me to say, 'I'm scared of this,' that stuck with me," Meier says. Her advice for prospective mentors: "You will have things to offer, but you will gain twice as much."

For her part, Grimes tells "everybody" about the program, including some at the shelter where she works. One of her daughters is now in Hennepin Connections, as is her daughter's boyfriend—all because of the great experience Grimes has had with Meier and the program. "It came

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**Student Reflections**

"I have been able to build a relationship and connect with my mentor in more ways than one. The mentorship program has held me accountable, inspired me, and uplifted and encouraged me to continue my journey."

### Student Reflections

"Having someone to talk to from time to time is a major plus. Just to have someone who wants to just chit-chat. Doing something different and learning from my experience. The benefit is priceless so I wouldn't trade this experience for anything."

"I have had [a mentor who] is genuinely interested in listening to me [helping] me through many changes and struggles that I am currently facing. Having my mentor's wisdom and advice lead me into improvement is a true blessing."



Students and mentors at the first year-end celebration event in 2015.

at the perfect time, when I needed it to, and it helped me to keep moving and to become what I am today," Grimes says. For the record, she's now pursuing a master's degree at the University of Phoenix and expects to graduate next May.

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After nine years, Hennepin Connections is still a work in progress, and the leadership team (which includes Andersen, Meier, and Kitzman) continues to refine mentor training, enhance recruitment, and plan for careful expansion in the future.

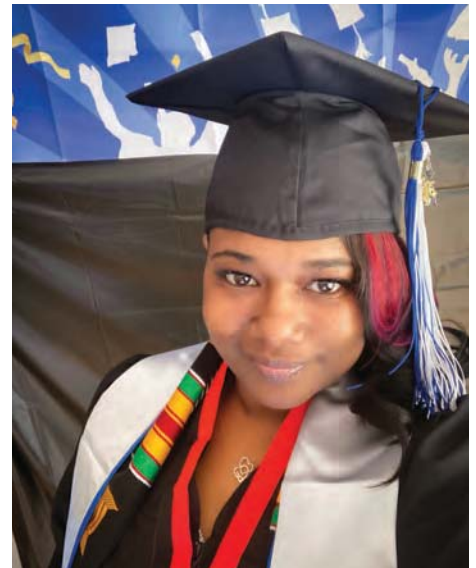
What excites Andersen most about the program are the serendipitous and even profound connections that are made—some leading to lifetime friendships. For people who would likely never meet (much less chat) on the street, it's an incredibly rare opportunity. Says Andersen: "In this society that we live in, that is so divided and so fractured, this is a program that brings people together across great divides—people with incredibly different

life stories and life experiences and even worldviews—and it gives them a chance to build relationships based on trust and goodwill and willingness to listen."

That was on full display at Minneapolis College on that April Tuesday. At the end of the evening, the three graduating students stood up to a round of loud cheers. And Kitzman had one more surprise announcement. Earlier that day—a full year ahead of his own graduation at Metro State—Jeffery was offered a full-time counseling position. It was an exclamation point of pride for a program that continues to change lives.

For more information on Hennepin Connections, contact Janice Andersen at [jandersen@mary.org](mailto:jandersen@mary.org). ✚

*Rick Moore has been an active volunteer and parish member for about 20 years. He's also been a mentor for Hennepin Connections since its inception.*



Deliah Grimes