



Reflections on the successes and challenges of the NINE TENTHS MENTORING PROGRAMME

The Power of Relationships

A volunteer reflection on the relationships built in the Nine Tenths mentoring programme

By Claire McCann

The Nine Tenths mentoring programme has just won the first place MacJannet Prize for Global Citizenship. This is the first time that first place has been awarded to a community engagement programme on the African continent, and this achievement speaks to the passion and resilience of all of the programme's stakeholders, including the RUC Division, GADRA Education, partner schools, Rhodes University volunteers and the Grade 12 learners (mentees).

This is an exciting time for Nine Tenths, and has allowed me to reflect around my own experience as a mentor and student leader in this space over the past three years. I am part of the many students who return as Nine Tenths volunteers year after year. Many of us initially arrived in this space out of a desire to "give back" to our Makhanda community. We return, however, not because we are being selfless, but because we have witnessed that what we give to these mentoring relationships is returned back to us in so many (and often unexpected) ways. We have realised that the mentoring relationship nurtured over the course of the programme is not about one side giving and the other side receiving, but is one where all of those involved stand to gain from these partnerships.

Building these mutually beneficial relationships is an exciting and dynamic process, as different groups of people come together with the aim to tackle injustice in education and grow our city. As we build relationships, it becomes clear that all of those we encounter in the programme is a partner, a stakeholder, an active citizen and, ultimately, a fellow community member. Sometimes, they become more – our mentees often begin to feel like little sisters and brothers, and, a little way down the road, we can spot them in Rhodes University lecture halls and tutorials.

I remember feeling nervous before my first mentoring session. I worried that I would not be able to connect with my mentees, that they would not want to open up to me, and that I would not be good enough as a mentor. I have spoken to many other mentors since then, and it seems this feeling is quite common: before the first mentoring session at the schools, sometimes there is a strange quiet in the bus, full of students anxiously awaiting the first time they would meet their mentees. The quiet tends to end there.

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As soon as all mentors and mentees are introduced to one another, the school classroom becomes loud, abuzz with animated voices, and the bus on the way back is filled with the stories of mentors' experiences. On my own mentoring journey, from the first session, I realised how quickly the mentorship bond can form. These relationships, which often last beyond the year the programme is implemented, have added so much value to my own university experience, and I have learned so much from my mentees that I have been able to apply to my own learning, relationships and life in general. I have to admit that I once met up with a mentee to help with their maths, but this work proved a little beyond my skill set and they ended up having to teach me!

Nine Tenths has also provided the opportunity to develop my own leadership potential and agency, and a more self-reflective and socially conscious form of citizenship deeply embedded in my own context. In this space, I have witnessed the power of mentors and mentees showing up consistently and committing to the relationship being built, I have realised that much meaningful education in university takes place beyond the classroom and I have learned that in the challenges I face I am never alone.

Like any relationship, the mentoring partnerships of Nine Tenths are not without their obstacles. When it comes to the time of year when mentees are expected to submit written work to mentors, challenges tend to arise, and need to be worked through as the relationship progresses. This year's group of mentors have an enormous task in front of them, as they seek to make connections with mentees for the first time virtually, and mentors volunteering for the first time this year have yet to experience the bus rides up to our partner schools.

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The relationships being built and sustained over the course of 2021 demand a huge commitment from mentors and mentees, and, as a student leader, I have found it so inspiring to see people rising to the challenge. While any face-to-face interactions may still be a little while away, I am excited for a time where mentors and mentees can once again meet in person. For now, I am thrilled to hear stories of strong bonds being formed in spite of the difficulties associated with online mentoring and I look forward to a future point when I will again be able to step into a classroom (and bus) filled with sound. ●

