Tutor works for 'Connection'
Mentor builds bond to put pupil on road to success

By Catherine Tsai
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Kate Doyle Siebert leaves work a little early on Thursdays during the school year. She's headed to the 21st floor of the Montgomery Ward Corporate Tower building on the southwest edge of the Cabrini-Green public-housing development. Once there, she'll spend two hours tutoring 14-year-old Shavon Beals.

"The absolute hardest part of tutoring is leaving work at quarter till 5 to be there on time because I really want to be there, but I also have some pretty severe responsibilities at work," says Siebert, an account manager at Cisco Systems.

"But you're always glad when you get there for the amount of time you invest and what you get back."

Siebert, 33, volunteers with the Kids' Connection, an after-school tutoring and mentoring program for about 100 students in 7th through 12th grade. The volunteers—there are about 120—and students meet once a week on Thursday or Friday in one-on-one sessions.

From 5:30 to 7:30 p.m., Siebert helps Beals with her homework. They sit amid neatly arranged rows of desks, filled with other pairs of students and tutors, on the otherwise empty and vast, gold-carpeted 21st floor. Wards, with its headquarters at 535 W. Chicago Ave., donates the use of the floor to the program.

Before the session begins, other students come over to hug and greet Siebert.

This spring day, Siebert also is listening as Beals tells about her school's band concert that day—she plays the clarinet.

Later, they discuss Beals' homework.

Siebert leans toward Beals as the two solve math problems on percentages. They hit dead ends but find the solutions together.

They also discuss moral values for an essay that Beals and her classmates must write.

"I'll try to pick something that I know nobody in my class is going to write about," Beals says.

After Siebert explains values like tolerance and generosity, Beals decides to write about courage. She writes a few paragraphs before showing Siebert what she has written about the courage of her mother, who died a few years ago.

"What you want to do," Siebert says, "is explain this so that someone who's reading this and doesn't know your story will say, 'You know what? She's right. She was very courageous.'"

The two have a relationship that fellow tutor Kristi Carpenter calls "very good."

"You can just see it," Carpenter says. "One thing that they encourage you to do, and one thing that Kate's been very good at, is they want us to keep journals. Shavon and Kate have been keeping them for years and years.

"One day they were reading each other's journals from three or four years ago, which was cute because Shavon, three years ago is a lifetime."

As part of the program, Beals has set goals, such as making the honor roll. Sometimes, she and Siebert go out as a reward when Beals has met a goal, and one weekend, Beals and her friends went to Siebert's house for a barbecue.

Day-to-day progress toward Beals' goals may be hard to see, Siebert says, but she is proud of Beals for raising her grades and improving her reading skills. She also is proud of Beals for fighting test anxiety last spring. The result? Beals scored particularly well on her end-of-the-year tests.

"If she graduates from high school and goes to college, I will be the proudest person on earth," Siebert says. "I mean, I get chills thinking about it."

Beals has told Siebert she wants to be a lawyer or teacher. Siebert began volunteering as a tutor in fall 1992, shortly after she moved to the Gold Coast.

"I like being part of the community that I live in," she says. "It's a big thing for me."

The program she volunteered with was run by Wards for 2nd to 6th graders. A friend who was a tutor told her about it. Siebert was paired with Beals four years ago.

"When Shavon graduated and wanted to continue with tutoring, she asked if I would be her tutor," Siebert says. So they moved to Kids' Connection.

In 1992, Daniel Bassill helped create Cabrini Connections, to pair adult mentors with children living in Cabrini-Green, to help them move from 7th grade through high school to a career. In 1993, Cabrini Connections started the Kids' Connection, which combines tutoring, mentoring and school-to-work programs for teens.

Then, in 1994, the Tutor/Mentor Connection was launched; this group works to increase after-school tutoring and mentoring opportunities throughout Chicago.

Kids' Connection also offers the students after-school activities, snacks and speakers—as well as two kinds of excursions. Field trips, which are consid-
Kate Doyle Siebert (left) and 14-year-old Shavon Beals work on a problem during a session of the Kids' Connection tutoring and mentoring program in the Montgomery Ward Corporate Tower building.

Tutor helps pupil find road to success

**Continued from Page 7**

Tiled "life experience" trips, are to the zoo or museums and are generally educational.

Other trips, to such places as Great America or a Chicago Bulls game, are rewards for students who have earned points through attendance or by bringing in their report cards.

"We try to duplicate as much as possible the experience and exposure that more affluent kids get every day," says Bassill, Cabrini Connections' president and chief executive officer.

"There's no science to what causes a kid's engine to be turned on to be a scientist or a lawyer, but the people they're exposed to play a big part in that."

Beals describes Siebert as "active and talkative," but Bassill has a different perspective. He calls her resourceful and dedicated.

"She has a full-time job, and she's been doing this for six or seven years," he says. "That shows commitment."

Over the years, Siebert has seen a number of tutors leave the program, burned out or frustrated because they can't immediately see a tangible result of their efforts.

"Most of the tutors want to come in, and they want this cute little kid hugging and kissing them, and that's not the way it is," she says. "The kids need to trust you, and they've seen a lot of do-gooders come in for a week or two weeks or a couple of months, and they're gone, and you never hear from them again."

Siebert, who was born in Milwaukee, moved a lot with her family but grew up mostly in Crystal Lake. After earning a communications degree from Northwestern University, Evanston, in 1990, she took a year off to travel. She worked as a nanny in Colorado and found jobs at a hotel before returning to this area for a job in the high-tech industry.

She is studying at NU's J.J. Kellogg Graduate School of Management in Evanston; she hopes to receive her master's degree in business administration in two years.

Siebert married in 1995, and her husband, John, often accompanies her and Beals on their outings—he also did the cooking at Beals' barbecue.

He often substitutes for Siebert when she has to miss a tutoring session. Beals "actually loves it when he substitutes," Siebert says. "He's an artist, so they draw pictures. He uses pictures to explain things. She thinks he's funny and enjoys when he's there."

Part of what keeps Siebert coming back every Thursday is the program, which offers a break from her fast-moving work world.

"I work in high-tech," she says. "All you're worried about is the stock price and your next deal, so it brings a more human element to what you do every day."

The other part is the students. "When's the last time you spent that much time with a bunch of 13-year-olds?" she asks.

"They kind of bring you back to reality a little bit. They keep me kind of hip."

She smiles. "You can't help but like them."

For more information on the Kids' Connection, as well as Cabrini Connections, the Tutor/Mentor Connection and the volunteer recruitment fairs on Sept. 10, 11 and 12, call 312-467-2889. Visit their Web site at http://www.tutormentorconnection.org or e-mail them at CabriniC@aol.com.