Small lessons are reward of mentoring

Somehow out there in the big, bad city, there are good people who are as dedicated to mentoring as a priest is to God or a mathematician is to numbers. These mentors can't wait to spend another evening, lunchtime or Saturday with their mentees. They immerse themselves in the child's life. They change the child's life, maybe even save it. Their own life is transformed in return.

I've met some of those mentors. I admire them. They're the stuff of feature stories, news conferences, TV documentaries.

I've met far more mentors like me. Mentors who have only slender hope that they've made a difference. Who often approach their mentor dates thinking they really have more urgent ways to spend these couple of hours. Who will when they sense their mentee would rather be watching anything, even C-SPAN, than talking with some tragically out-of-it do-gooder with the fancy title "mentor."

And yet a lot of these people continue to be mentors because they continue to believe that we're all better off when more of us get out of our ghettos from time to time.

"I learned respect for her, and who she was, and not to expect she was always going to open up and tell me about her life." As often as not, it's these small lessons that are the reward of mentoring. I've been a mentor to three students in the past few years. I haven't invested a lot of time and have no evidence of having done much good. But I've met three girls who have taught me more about the beauties and frustrations of being an African American girl in a poor neighborhood than I've ever learned from the news. I think one of these girls will stay a friend.

She dropped by the paper the other day. I wasn't there. She left a note. I realized right then that, though I could have and should have been a better mentor, here was my reward and hers. Just as I left my ghetto to go visit her in her school, she could now walk into a big downtown building unannounced, ride the elevator up and know she was welcome.

To find locations for the tutor mentor fair, you can call 812-492-9941 or log onto www.tutormentorexchange.net.

Orange as it seems here in one of the most culturally varied parts of the planet, most of us do still live in ghettos, moving through our days in worlds bounded by color, class, language, ZIP codes. That's one reason the city needs mentors, even the imperfect ones — to help open the borders and let us introduce ourselves to each other.

If you need to be reminded of that, maybe you'll be lucky enough in the next couple of days to walk into a Borders, a Barnes & Noble or one of the public buildings participating in a three-day tutor mentor fair in Chicago and the suburbs. I visited one of the displays Thursday at the Thompson Center in the Loop.

In the noisy atrium sat a couple of dozen tables piled with brochures and tended by hopeful staff people from an assortment of agencies. Touring the tables was like touring the town.

African-American kids from Cabrini. Hispanic kids at Young Center.

Homeless kids at Casa Central.

Refugee kids from Afghanistan, Bosnia, Sudan, Vietnam.

Kids in need of help learning to add, subtract, read, speak English. Kids in need of an adult to listen, counsel or simply tell them that they're good at something. Kids in need of mentors to do what parents and teachers can't or don't.

So many kids with so many needs. Never enough mentors.

"The word 'mentor' has connotations of seriousness, responsibility, big commitment," said Trudi Langendorf, who works with refugees at the Heartland Alliance. "Most people feel stretched just managing their own family and friends."

But becoming a mentor becomes easier if you think small, if you enter the relationship not expecting to change a life, but merely to engage and understand a life you might otherwise never encounter:

A friend of mine recalls the reluctance she felt every Monday night when she set out for her mentor date — and how refreshed she felt by the time she left. She would have preferred that her student sit there wordless for 20 minutes, as sometimes happened, but the silence was part of the lesson — the woman learning about the girl.