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Getting kids Xcited

Mentoring program provides kids motivation for academic, athletic and social growth

By Erin Spry

When asked, 11-year-old Reid Moriarty would probably say two of his best friends are Stefan Hochfilzer and Ben Erion. But these two, approaching their mid-20s, are hardly the buddies Moriarty would have met on the monkey bars.

Hochfilzer and Erion came into Moriarty's life through Club Xcite, a mentoring program dedicated to providing kids with motivation for academic, athletic and social growth.

Hochfilzer, a recent business graduate of University of California, Berkeley, founded the company almost a year ago after a consulting job wasn't giving him what he wanted.

Del Mar-born Hochfilzer has worked with kids since he was 14. He hooked up with an old friend from tennis camp, Matt Carey, a Kansan who had also just graduated with a business degree.

Club Xcite was born. Since then, the business has grown to 45 enrolled kids and 18 mentors. At this point, they have a 100 percent client retention rate.

Their success isn't surprising. Spending even five minutes with either of these two makes one thing clear: they are enthusiastic about what they do.

"We're two young guys with a dream, with a passion, and we kind of figured out a way of working with kids," said Hochfilzer.

For Reid's mother, Andrea Moriarty, Club Xcite provided the unique approach she was looking for in mentoring. The program focuses largely on kids with mild to severe learning disabilities, and Reid is on the autism spectrum.

Moriarty needed someone that would match her son's exuberance and help him interact socially. Hochfilzer started out as his mentor, and then assigned Erion to the job.

Since then, Moriarty has seen a noticeable difference in her son. He's done two things that nobody in his family, not even his twin sister, could get him to do: go down a winding tunnel slide and ride a two-wheeler bike.

The motivation of Hochfilzer and Erion made these two tasks, though previously an obstacle, a regular activity for Reid.

"It looks like they're just hanging out," said Moriarty, "but (the mentors) are a hybrid between a childcare professional and a therapist, really."

That balance is exactly what Hochfilzer and Carey are striving for in their business model. They're very selective about the mentors they hire, and specifically match each one up to a certain family.

Most of the mentors are in college or recently graduated, several in the field of psychology, teaching or counseling.

If a family needs a mentor to help their child with math and social skills, and then show him to play the guitar and hit a jump shot, Club Xcite tries to weed out the best possible candidate for the job. They won't give a mentor to a family until they find the right one.

Background checks are also done, and mentors are required to stay with the same family for a minimum of six months.

"Consistency is very important," said Hochfilzer.

The biggest requirement, however, is a genuine enthusiasm for working with kids, something that both Hochfilzer and Carey have ingrained.

"I've just always been able to relate to kids well. I don't know, maybe it's because I never grew up," Carey said with a laugh. "There's nothing else that keeps me excited day to day."

Because most of these kids have what Carey calls "small little tweaks" that may cause them struggle with school or their peers, Club Xcite tries to overcome any weaknesses and build up strengths.

Hochfilzer, who had a stuttering problem when he was younger, knows what it's like to need a self-esteem boost.

"They need that one-on-one mentor to build their confidence up and make them believe that they're not different," he said.

According to Moriarty, the passion these mentors have for working with kids and making them feel special is an especially important aspect. "Stefan has set an example in his

business, that his employees follow suit and model, which is to give integrity and respect to kids who are different.”

Although a lot of Club Xcite centers on fun and sports, academics are a major focus. The program subscribes to a “work before play” philosophy.

Having a mentor help with homework is another reason why the program is so successful, said Hochfilzer. Each 20-something mentor functions as an in-between, not just a friend but also not a parent. Kids tend to listen and abide better, said Carey, whether they’re being asked to finish their homework or stop cussing.

Membership fees include most transportation as well as various benefits and discounts for enrolled families. But money isn’t the important thing, said Hochfilzer: “Our success is measured by how many kids we can help.”

For Moriarty, a Club Xcite membership is well worth what she gets back.

“Really, you can’t buy that,” she said. “I think that’s the gift to the community.”

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