



## Coach, teach, mentor, make a difference



### VIEWPOINT

*Bill Ehret*

I have in my desk a piece of notebook paper. When I unfold it, I see the handwriting of an early-teen boy. It's a letter of apology.

The young man who wrote the note played on a middle school football team that I helped coach. A kid with a lot working against him, he was a likable guy who worked hard in practice. Unfortunately, he had trouble keeping his grades up. When they fell below eligibility level, he was dismissed from the team.

He was devastated. I talked to him about it. I told him he could still come to practice, that he could participate in other ways. The next day, he didn't show up. I initially was disappointed, but then I got his note. It explained that something came up and he simply couldn't be there. He didn't want me to think he's a quitter. He was looking forward to turning things around.

"Today is the first day of the rest of my life," he wrote, echoing something I had said to him.

I've gotten my share of letters-some from impressive people-but this is the one I show off. It suggests that, in some small way, I made a difference for a kid in a tough spot.

I tell this story not to brag or suggest that I'm someone special. On the contrary: I mention it to demonstrate how easy it can be to do something meaningful for a kid, and to challenge you to do something similar.

I also don't mean to suggest that football is the answer to life's problems. I've coached other sports, too, and supported other extracurricular activities. I know this same kind of thing can happen with kids in band, cheerleading, theater and French club. I coach sports because I love sports. You can make your difference doing what you love.

What did I do? Nothing you couldn't do. I challenged some kids to do their best. I applauded them when they worked hard, and corrected them when they made mistakes. I set expectations. I celebrated with them when they succeeded, and encouraged them when they failed.

And what did the players learn? How to respect themselves and others. How to try to improve every day. How to rely on others and let others rely on them. How to focus on a task. How to set a goal, and partner with others to achieve that goal. How to strive to win, and how to respond constructively to failure.

In other words, they learned skills required to succeed in the workplace and in life-skills employers know the kids will need in today's competitive work environment.

I like to think I'm a good coach, but any difference I've made in a kid's life has less to do with my coaching abilities and more to do with simply being there. Pushing, encouraging, listening-things you can do.

Today's young people have amazing potential, but I worry about the forces threatening that potential. Kids face countless distractions, some more serious than others-families in disarray, parents or siblings in trouble, classroom pressures, intrusive and relentless media, friends tempting them into bad behaviors, parents too busy to get engaged. Other kids simply risk falling short of their potential-they avoid major pitfalls, but fail to realize their full capabilities.

What can you do? Coach. Tutor. Mentor. Listen. Put your passions and talents to work. Do small things that make a big difference. When? Now. With the school year just begun, there's no better time to help a kid get started on the right path.

I challenge everyone reading this-especially young professionals-to pick up the phone. Call your old school. Call that recreation center you pass every day. Call one of the many organizations that work with kids. Call someone and ask, "How can I help?"

Don't expect pay. Don't expect honors. Do expect to make a difference. And if someday you get an indication of your impact-maybe a short note written in pencil on notebook paper-you'll have more compensation than you ever imagined.

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