

# Ripple effect of mentor's friendship endures for Danbury man

By Rob Ryser

DANBURY — It's not typical for the relationship between a volunteer mentor and a Danbury student to continue 10 years after high school graduation.

Then again, there's nothing typical about the mentor-student relationship between volunteer Judy Coco and Jonathan Calderon, a 29-year-old construction manager who as a third grader had missed more school than he had attended when he was paired with Coco as his mentor.

"The challenge for us who are mentors is most of us will never know our impact," said Coco, referring to the nonprofit Danbury Student and Business Connection, now in its 31st year.

"That's why it was so rewarding to know that Jonathan has become such a gentleman who has goals and is determined and wants to make a difference for others."

When Calderon reached out to Coco recently to connect after they had not seen each other for two years, it was clear to Coco that the impact of their weekly meetings when Calderon was in school continued to ripple.

"I was just blown away by how much he had matured and how much he was focused, because he was all over the place when he was younger," Coco said during an interview on Friday. "I was in happy tears after the



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**Jonathan Calderon and Judy Coco, both of Danbury, who met when Calderon was in third grade and Coco was his mentor.**

meeting when I got into my car."

Calderon said he didn't understand in the beginning that Coco was showing up every week to sup-

port him because she chose to be there, not because she had to be there. Today he sees how much difference that one hour each week with her

made in his life.

"Judy was there not because she had to be there, but to try to guide me," Calderon said in a DSABC release. "[S]he

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*Judy Coco*

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Coco said she was telling Calderon's story now to help the DSABC recruit volunteer mentors for the new school year in the fall. The nonprofit, which has been on hiatus during the coronavirus crisis, matches at-risk students with "a supportive and caring adult who assists students to succeed in school by developing a one-on-one relationship."

The goal is to "improve academic performance, attendance, behavior, attitude toward school, and most importantly, self-esteem and motivation," by mentors serving as "a positive adult role model providing moral support and encouragement."

Part of the program's magic is that the benefits run both ways, Coco said.

"As the mentor you don't realize how much you get out of it, and how much you learn from them," said Coco, a semi-retired mother of two, who worked 35 years for Praxair in leadership development. "I gained more from this than Jonathan."

Not all mentor relationships last the length of the student's school years.

"After Jonathan I mentored a young lady starting in the fifth grade and she didn't like having to miss lunch with her girlfriends," Coco said. "We went for about a year and it just didn't work out."

Coco underwent a similar period of resistance with Jonathan when he was in middle school.

"He didn't want to be with me, and I felt like I was wasting his time," Coco said, who was encouraged to persevere by fellow mentors.

Coco remembered how Calderon had been in six different schools between kindergarten and third grade, and how had been absent more than he attended when she met him. She was able to encourage him to do what he didn't want to do: get out of bed and come to school.

Coco got past the difficult middle school phase in part by bringing games to their weekly meetings that catered to Calderon's aptitude for math.

"She was like a second mom to me," Calderon said in the release. "Who knows where I would be?"

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