

Ever wonder how much difference one person can make?

Ask Meghan Welvaert. Because when it seemed like the whole world had given up on the troubled teen, all it took was one caring person to convince her how wonderful life could be . . .

Even from across the room, Karen Black could tell by the 16-year-old's slumped shoulders that she'd been carrying the weight of the world far too long.

I know everything hurts now, but things will change, Karen's heart ached to tell her. Yet she knew Meghan's heart had been broken too often to believe anything she—or any adult—said. That kind of trust had to be earned.

And Karen was determined to earn it. Meghan needs someone, she thought. And I won't let her down . . .

A teacher with three teens of her own, the Bedford, New Hampshire, mom had a good idea what made kids tick—understanding how, even when they acted grown-up, they still needed someone who cared.

That's why Karen decided to become a Court-Appointed Special Advocate. CASAs were volunteers trained to be the voice of foster kids—kids torn from their families by circumstance, neglect or abuse. Kids like Meghan.

Foster care was supposed to save Meghan Welvaert from a family situation too troubled for any 16-year-

old. But suddenly finding herself in a house full of strangers made Meghan feel like an outcast.

And to Meghan, Karen was just another stranger. Who wants your help anyway? she sneered when they met.

But being a teenager was hard enough under the best of circumstances, Karen knew. And Meghan was alone in the world. So she vowed, "Whenever you need me, just call—and I'll be there."

Earning Meghan's trust

And Karen was there, helping Meghan get adjusted as she arrived in a new foster home, everything that she owned slung in a backpack over her shoulders. Moving Meghan to a group home a few weeks later because she hadn't fit in. And talking Meghan through move after move, even if she wouldn't talk about it much herself.

But sooner or later, Meghan would think, she'll give up on me like everyone else always has. So when in court one day, Meghan heard Karen tell the judge that she recommended counseling for

her, Meghan screamed, "Like you care anyway!"

She expected Karen to be mad. Maybe even walk away. But instead, Karen just looked at her and began, "I do care . . ."

"Yeah, right," Meghan interrupted. "You're being paid to be nice to me!"

"Oh, honey," Karen said. "This isn't my job. I'm here because I want to be!"

In that moment, something inside Meghan softened. So the next time she saw Karen, she handed her a letter.

"What's this?" Karen asked.

Meghan shrugged. "Just read it later, okay?"

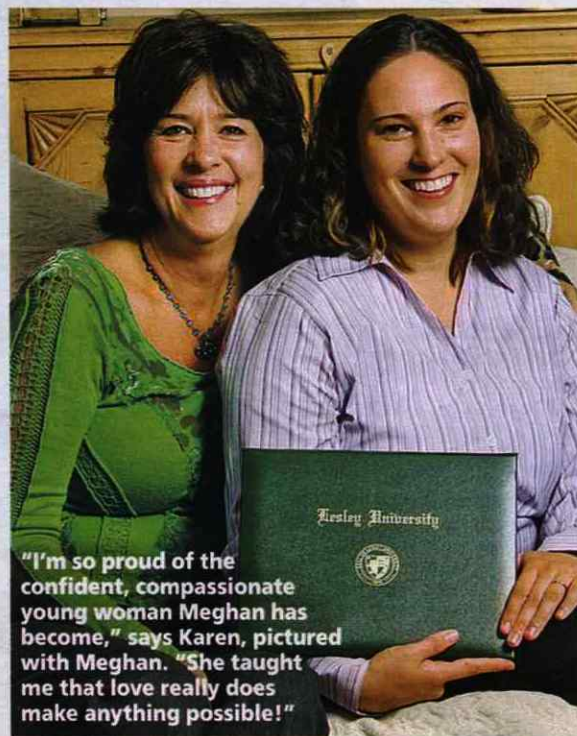
Two lives changed

So on the way home, Karen pulled over—and a lump formed in her throat as she read:

I want to thank you for trying to understand all the feelings and needs I have . . . for protecting me and helping me . . . for being in my life so that maybe someday I will be someone.

Oh, Meghan, Karen thought. You already are someone—someone special! And tucking the letter into her purse, she headed back to Meghan's group home to tell her so.

"I wish you could see yourself through my eyes," Karen cried. "After all



"I'm so proud of the confident, compassionate young woman Meghan has become," says Karen, pictured with Meghan. "She taught me that love really does make anything possible!"

you've been through . . . you're amazing!"

Suddenly, it was as if a lever switched on in Meghan's heart. Because finally, she realized, someone cared. And that changed everything!

Soon, Meghan was smiling when Karen visited—even trusting her with her dreams.

"I want to go to college," she confided. "But I've moved around so much, my grades stink. I'd never get accepted."

"You're smart enough to do whatever you want," Karen encouraged.

So even after she turned 18 and "aged" out of foster care, Meghan called Karen for support. And just as she'd promised, Karen was there, cheering as

Meghan earned her GED. As she applied to college—and got in! As she found her first apartment and job, working with troubled teens like she once was.

"Believe in yourself," she tells them, "and know that your life will get better!"

Today, Meghan loves her life—and says she owes that to Karen. "Without her," she says, "I wouldn't be who I am."

And Karen feels the same. "I became a CASA volunteer because I wanted to help kids. But being part of Meghan's life changed my own. Meghan taught me that love can make things right—and that's the most important lesson we will ever learn!"

—Deborah Bebb

Did you know?
Not only mentees benefit: Mentors also experience higher self-esteem and more happiness!

4 ways to boost any 'tween or teen's self-esteem

1 Heap on the praise.
But focus on things she does, not appearance. Did she make a goal in soccer? Clean her room? "Catching them being good gives kids a real boost," says clinical child psychologist Kerby Alvy, Ph.D. (cicparenting.org).

2 Show interest in what they love.
"Ask them to tell you about it," encourages Alvy. Knowing that you value their interests makes kids feel valued, too.

3 Share a story from your teen years.
"We all go through anxiety at that age," reminds Alvy. Letting kids know you went through similar situations reassures them.

4 Give an "I trust you" reward.
When they do something responsible, consider offering them a reward that shows trust, such as a slightly later curfew.

