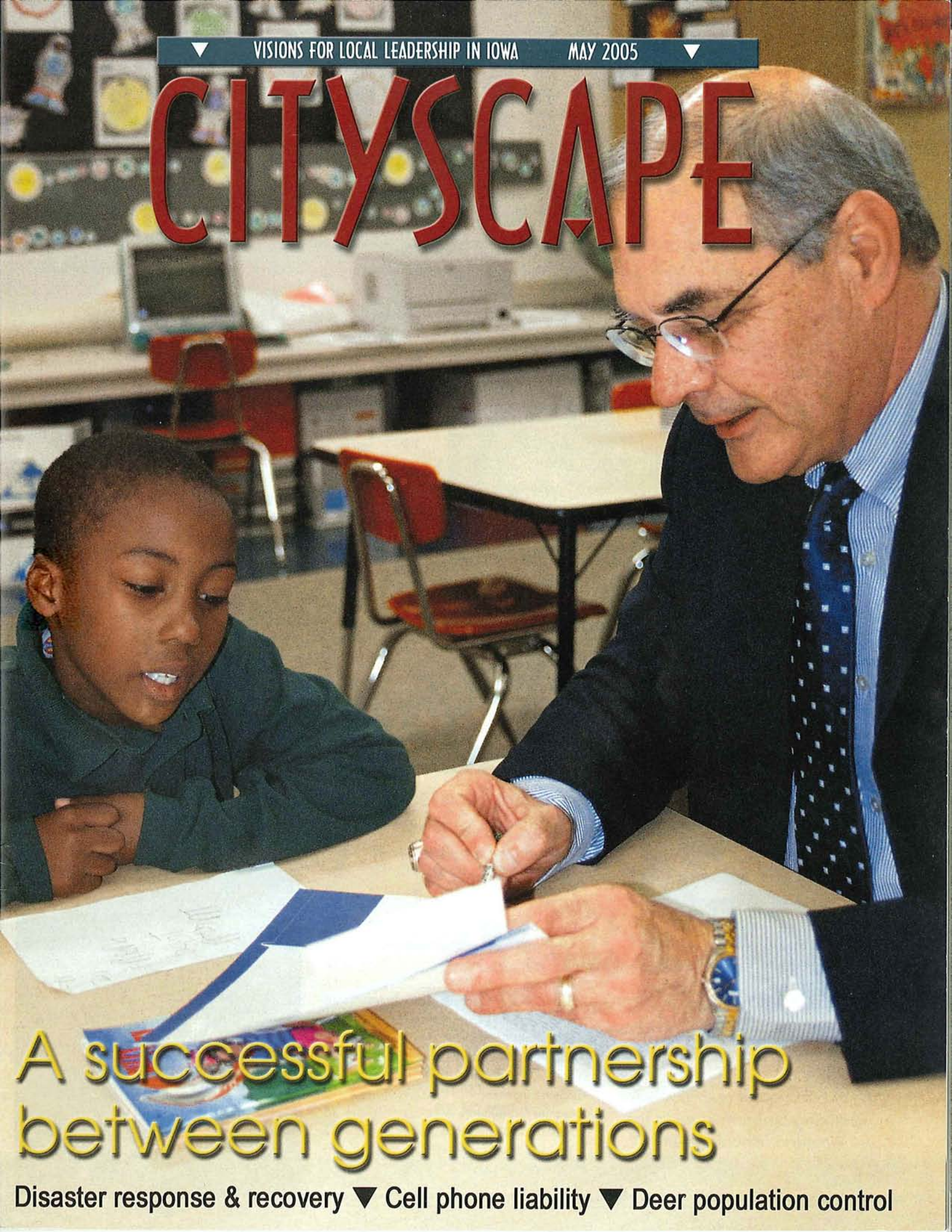


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Tuesdays with Hurley

by Betsy Knoblock
Communication Coordinator

On Tuesdays at 1:15pm, Waterloo Mayor Tim Hurley has an important appointment he never wants to miss. After getting buzzed in through the office at the Dr. Walter Cunningham School for Excellence and heading down the hallway in a sea of little people in khaki pants, he enters Mr. Ferguson's first grade class. Smiles are exchanged and one young man gets up from his desk to greet him. Mayor Hurley's important appointment is with seven-year-old Damonte Thornton and for the next forty-five minutes, the two spend one-on-one time reading, practicing spelling or just chatting about things like little brothers and lost dogs.

Mayor Hurley participates in a successful in-school mentoring program that is led by the Big Brothers, Big Sisters of Northeast Iowa, in cooperation with the Waterloo Community Schools. With staffing and support from this local organization, over 300 mentors have been paired in Waterloo schools this school year with students in grades kindergarten through high school. Big Brothers, Big Sisters provides expertise in the areas of recruitment, screening and support of mentors, while the school district lends office space and contacts through its school business partnership, the Partners in Education program. The City of Waterloo has been a Partner in Education with Cunningham since December 8, 1986.

The Big Brothers, Big Sisters of Northeast Iowa is an affiliate of its national chapter that serves over 200,000 children, ages 6 through 18, in 5,000 communities in every state with its traditional match program. Many in-school mentors become so attached to their mentee that several have transitioned to the traditional program, allowing the match to spend time together outside the school setting. The In-School program differs from the traditional Big Brothers, Big Sisters program because the match is made for a school year at a time and the mentors are only allowed to see their child at the school. Participants are asked to make a commitment for that school year, go through the screening process and then meet their child a few weeks into the new school year.

The Cunningham School for Excellence has seen a large percentage of the In-School adult mentors work with many of its 387 students. The school, which opened its doors in 2002, is a non-traditional public school with a uniform policy (students and teachers), open meeting areas, year-round classes and gender-based classrooms. Damonte's class has seventeen boys that will have the same students and same teacher from 1st grade until 5th grade. The In-School mentors seem to be an excellent partnership for this unique classroom setting and so far, it has seen tremendous success.

Cunningham Principal Elizabeth Crowley sees endless benefits to her students from the adult mentors that take time out of their busy schedules to be with her students. "The relationships are powerful," she said. "To have a strong connection with an adult helps the children academically, socially, and gives them someone they can talk to." Crowley can also see the positive impact the adult presence makes for the entire building, students and staff alike.

"Mentoring can be a scary word; it seems to come with a lot of responsibility. But there's nothing heavy about this at all. It's easy; just be yourself and open up to making a connection with a child."

Tim Hurley
Waterloo Mayor & Adult Mentor

Teacher Jeffrey Ferguson has observed the positive changes in his seventeen first-graders since last fall. "When the students come back from their mentor sessions, they are revitalized," he says with a gleam in his eye. "It raises their self-esteem to have that one-on-one time with someone who thinks they're special. The time the mentors give is priceless." Mr. Ferguson also works directly with the mentors by giving them spelling lists, books to read together, and suggestions for specific areas where each child would benefit from extra help.

Mayor Hurley sits in a child-size red chair; his knees hit the underside of table and his formal suit seems out of place next to Damonte's navy polo and khaki pants. But he doesn't seem to notice; he looks through the teacher's notes and starts on the weekly spelling list with Damonte carefully saying letters to insure he gets it right. Then they read a book together, working through the tough words and politely correcting the mispronunciations. Damonte likes to read aloud and show off his other academic skills. "I'm good at math," he says. He keeps his smile small, but one can tell he likes having his time with Tim Hurley.

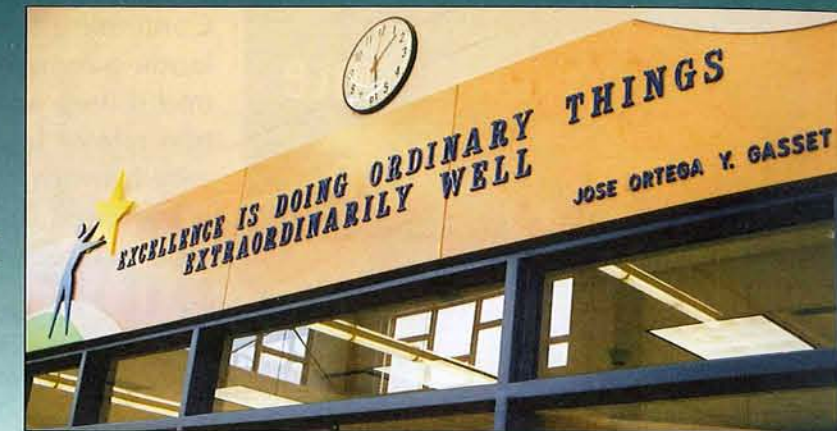
Hurley asks him what he wants to be when he grows up - "Either a fireman or a teacher," Damonte says confidently. Hurley wanted to either be a forest ranger or a line officer in the U.S. Navy when he grew up. Instead, he spent 36 years as an engineer for John Deere Waterloo operations and shortly after he retired became the full time mayor of Waterloo.

Hurley originally got involved with the In-School program because of a recruitment event that was held last spring. He has encouraged other city leaders to become involved in the program by sharing his own experiences. Additionally, he believes other communities could benefit with similar mentoring programs because it gives elected officials the opportunity to give back to their community and help make the next generation successful citizens.

Big Brothers, Big Sisters In-School coordinator Sharon Voigt can hardly contain her excitement when talking about the success of the program. One of her main responsibilities is to recruit new mentors, "We are always seeking new people for the program," she says. "The qualifications are simple - a love for children and a value to education." She believes the adult connections made helps keep the kids coming to school and engaged in the classroom.

Michelle Temeyer is the director of community education in the Waterloo Schools and works closely with the In-School program. It is just one aspect of their mission for communities to create meaningful opportunities for parents and community members to become involved in their local classrooms. "The mentoring program reflects an important partnership between school and community," Temeyer says. "It's important to take time out for kids and the mayor's commitment this last year has been outstanding."

Having Mayor Hurley be a part of the In-School program gives a well-known face to the initiative and shows that anyone can find the time to connect with a child in need of another caring adult in their life. "Mentoring can be a scary word," Hurley says. "It seems to come with a lot of responsibility. But there's nothing heavy about this at all. It's easy; just be yourself and open up to making a connection with a child."



Part of the big picture

The In-School Mentoring Program is part of a community-wide initiative to protect its children ages six to eighteen. The initiative called Cedar Valley's Promise, the Alliance for Youth, is a grassroots movement to improve the lives of our children through community-wide involvement. It connects parents, neighbors, businesses, governments and youth-serving organizations to provide all children with the support, assets, and resources necessary to achieve their fullest potential.

Cedar Valley's Promise encourages community groups and individual citizens to commit themselves to action and publicizes opportunities to do so. It identifies existing community resources and initiatives, acts as a catalyst to strengthen community support for youth/children and it provides guidance for education, human services, and for the establishment of strong community relationships.

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