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Filling the Missing Part of a Child's Village



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WHEN WE STUDY HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, WE REALIZE THAT CHILDREN'S FIRST TEACHERS ARE OFTEN INFORMAL ONES — FAMILY MEMBERS AND FRIENDS WHO GUIDE AND DIRECT THEM.

Having a large network of support makes it more likely that we can raise healthy, well-rounded children. The African proverb “it takes a village to raise a child” has been shown true time and time again.

This approach works well until we find a child whose village does not have all the resources or experiences they need to navigate a new challenge. Personally, I was a first-generation college graduate, and the first to obtain advanced degrees. When I was in high school, thinking college might be my next step, there was no one in my village to guide me. We were in uncharted territory. So where could I turn for help? Typically, we think of mentors as the people who guide us when we need help. But I would like to propose that there are some people who go above and beyond mentoring. I've had many mentors in my educational career, but the ones who did the heavy lifting I consider my academic goals—a sort of kinsman redeemer.

The word “goel” is based on the Hebrew word *ga'al*, in connection with the Hebrew law, and refers to “a person who as the nearest relative of another, is placed under certain obligations to him” (classic.net.bible.org). We see a common example in the story of Ruth and Boaz (see Ruth 3). In education, we often see teachers who feed their students, who help pay their fees, and even buy them clothes or supplies. We have even seen teachers adopt students. These actions are not mentoring, they are, in my perspective, those of an academic *goel* — an academic kinsman who redeems.

This edition of the Lake Union Herald focuses on Adventist Christian education. While I did not attend Adventist schools growing up, I have had the opportunity to teach at Andrews for the past 13 years. What I've been able to witness is just how many academic *goels* I have the privilege of working with. I have seen our professors take our students home, feed them, guide them, even help pay bills for them. I've spoken with students who have told me amazing stories of academic *goels* throughout their Christian education. Why would teachers do this? To be the missing part of a child's village. To be a kinsman and to redeem. These amazing Adventist educators, who work at all levels of education, are truly fulfilling Hebrews 13:16 because they “do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.” May all we do please our God. ■

Melissa Ponce-Rodas is an assistant professor of psychology at Andrews University. She and her husband Segundo have twin boys, Samuel and Jonathan. Her research and advocacy revolve around the intersections of religion and domestic violence.

