

A Heartbeat of Student Success

Volunteers are the lifeblood of Minds Matter NYC, which connects low-income students with the resources to succeed in college.

By Kenya McCullum

When Angel Rendon describes his experience as a volunteer for Minds Matter NYC, he sums it up this way: “It’s my No. 1 favorite thing to do.”

And it’s no wonder he feels that way. As a student at A. Philip Randolph Campus High School, Rendon was inspired by the volunteer mentors who dedicated their weekends to helping underserved students like him prepare for the SAT, sharpen their writing skills, and understand the overall college admission process.

THE BEATING HEART OF ACHIEVEMENT

For the last 35 years, Minds Matter NYC has heavily relied on volunteers to deliver services to students. In fact, the organization was run entirely by volunteers in the beginning, and as it grew, so has the role of the approximately 500 people who give their time. Mentors, for example, build relationships with students and offer guidance on academic, professional, and personal topics that are part of the program’s curriculum. In addition, the group pairs students with college coaches, writing and critical thinking advisers, and career coaches. Those who have experience as a mentor can choose to become a volunteer team leader, which entails acting as the chief facilitator in the room as mentors and students work together.



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Cosette Gutierrez
Executive Director
Minds Matter NYC



No matter what role volunteers want to play, or how much time they're able to dedicate to the organization, there's a place for them in the Minds Matter NYC community.

"Our volunteers are the heartbeat...We couldn't do this work without them," said Executive Director Cosette Gutierrez. "Our volunteers come in different shapes and sizes, so I say that if you want to volunteer for Minds Matter NYC, you can do it for 90 minutes or you can do it for 20 years — and everything in between."

PEEKING INTO THE FUTURE

For Rendon, spending time with Minds Matter NYC's mentors gave him a glimpse at the future. In addition to working closely with two mentors, he got the opportunity to speak to others on the team of volunteers. As they told their stories and students got their questions answered, it really opened Rendon's eyes to the options.

"It opened up the landscape of what was possible, and different ways to make a good living and have some success," Rendon said.

Rendon was especially interested in how one of his mentors found success as an attorney at a big law firm.

"He was extremely transparent about what he liked about his work and what he didn't," Rendon recalled. "In the back of my mind, I always thought becoming a lawyer was a worthy goal that could be a fit for me. My mentor was the first actual corporate attorney I'd met who explained things to me like how much money you make, what the job is actually like, and the things he hated about it. I'd never had that much texture on it — not even close."

THE VIEW FROM THE OTHER SIDE

Today, not only is Rendon an attorney at a big law firm in New York, he is among the volunteers showing Minds Matter NYC students what is

possible. After previously serving as a writing coach, he recently came back in response to the organization's outreach to program alumni who had also served as volunteers. Rendon is now a team leader, and finds it rewarding to help students who reflect his past experiences.

"I have enormous respect for the students maintaining a commitment to go there every Saturday morning. All the students are already involved in other extracurriculars. They have big goals that they're working toward," he said. "My respect and gratitude for the students comes from a personal knowledge of everything they're doing and how hard they're working."

According to Gutierrez, when volunteers see how hard students are working toward their goals, it inspires them to do as much as they can to contribute to their success.

"Volunteers say loud and clear that our students are committed, dedicated, and so passionate about their future that they want to help," she said. "We've built such an incredible community of support that they can't imagine a world without volunteering with us, which is pretty amazing."

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