

SUCCESS STORY: SENIOR FINDS A TUTOR AND LIFE COACH



Senior Trey Cole and Mrs. Dianne Mitchener go over Cole's study plan for his final exams. The two have a good working relationship that has taken Cole from a seventh grade reading level to eleventh or twelfth grade level in less than two years. Mrs. Mitchener said, "Trey is exceptional. He's bright. He's going places." Photo: G. Gowen

At graduation on May 19, if anyone asked Mrs. Dianne Mitchener about senior Trey Cole, here's what she would say: "Trey is exceptional. He's bright. He's going to go places." Mrs. Mitchener should know. She's spent over two years working with Cole as his reading tutor and life coach. Trey calls Mrs. Mitchener "really, my second mom." Proof of this relationship came in the form of an invitation Cole sent to Mrs. Mitchener along with one of the four graduation tickets allotted to his family.

Cole is the first to admit that he struggled in school during his first two years here. "I wasn't motivated inside of school because I knew I wasn't the greatest student," he said. "I turned my focus to working outside of school. I did landscaping and mowed lawns. I was paying for the things I wanted to do by doing work on the weekends and after school."

Even though he didn't often like being inside a classroom, Cole has always cared about the school. "I love Catholic and always wanted to graduate from here. I love the people and the teachers. I definitely feel that if I would have gone [to another school] I probably would have dropped out junior year when I found out I could make a lot of money on my own."

The summer before junior year was a turning point in Cole's school life. After going through extensive testing, he and his parents learned that he needed a different kind of help than he'd been getting. He was comprehending and retaining what he read only at a seventh grade level.

Cole's father, Mr. Robby Cole said, "We asked [the CHS] teachers every year if Trey really needed to be at a college prep school. At no point did his teachers ever say, 'No, he isn't good enough to be here at Catholic High.' [During a meeting with Mr. Straessle], he suggested that maybe we were missing something, and further testing might need to be done. We just want to express how much Mr. Straessle, all of Trey's teachers, and the staff have put in to make sure Trey became a success story."

Cole soon met Mrs. Mitchener who has moved all over the South and has taught everything from the young children of highly motivated foreign dignitaries to teenagers with severe learning problems who inhabited the "self-contained" trailer classroom of a 1970s public high school.

Cole and Mrs. Mitchener didn't immediately find a connection. Eventually, they began to understand each other. Mrs. Mitchener said, "He figured out that I wasn't stupid. When he realized that what we were doing worked, he began to trust that what I was saying about preparation was true."

Cole said, "After football practice in the summer after my sophomore year, I basically had to re-learn how to read. I had to retrain my brain how to read. It actually took until the beginning of this year until I really saw results. I realized that the tutoring was actually helping. We started it at my reading level."

Trey began doing several of the things Mrs. Mitchener had suggested such as keeping a planner and visualizing the things he was reading. On one occasion, Mrs. Mitchener helped him prepare for a book test, a task he often put off because it was frustrating to him.

Mrs. Mitchener recounted a breakthrough. "He comes in to me that day and he says, 'I can't believe we spent all that time and did all that work. It was just so easy.' I said, 'Trey Cole, listen to yourself. That test was not easy.' That was the first time that he realized that he had to follow through with the preparation [we had talked about] to be successful. He had not done that in the past."

Mrs. Mitchener and Cole worked on organizational skills, memory devices, and reading programs. One program named "Visualizing and Verbalizing" helps students picture exactly what it is they are reading, a skill many people do automatically; however, those with certain learning differences have to undertake this mindfully. Cole's reading proficiency went from a seventh grade level to close to twelfth grade in a little over a year's time.

The reading tutors work in a quiet but busy area on the second floor. Three of four qualified reading specialists work with students with a wide variety of reading issues. Mrs. Mitchener not only helped Cole with reading skills; she also served as a kind of life coach. Cole and Mrs. Mitchener found they had visited the same places and that their families owned farms in the same part of one of the states where Mrs. Mitchener had lived.

"We just found many things they had in common," said Mrs. Mitchener. "He could take criticism from me. I would be talking and he would not be listening. He would say, 'I'm sorry.' I would say, 'What were you thinking about?' He would say, 'Cabo.' I just laughed with him. When he would zone out, I would say, 'Cabo again?'"

Outside of school, Cole continued finding lucrative part time jobs. He has worked with two construction companies over the past two years and currently has a mentor who hired him to work full time after graduation. It's plain to teachers and other adults who have been around Cole that he will be a successful adult.

He also has a plan: "I am definitely not done with school but ready to start the next chapter. I may take a finance or business management class at Pulaski Tech to get the business experience"

[My construction industry mentor] is a really good teacher," said Cole. "During spring break, I was working 10-11 hours a day. We'd get done about 5:00 and we'd just sit there and we would talk about work and family. I plan to be my own in a few years. I'm still figuring out what specifically I want to do, but I really like the custom side of building."

Mrs. Mitchener acknowledges that the school's reading program does not work miracles on its own. She said, "If you get a kid who really wants to work at learning what we have to offer, then he can succeed."