

Case Story: Driving Towards Friendship

A Case Story created by the [Centre for Community Based Research](#) as part of Community Living Ontario's Student Links Program Evaluation

Diego is 21, a car enthusiast, and a coop student at local auto-shop where he spends his time changing oil, attending to tires, rust proofing, and other jobs around the shop. When he's not at the auto shop, he likes working on his Dad's vintage car. His Dad has had the car for almost 40 years; they work on the car in the garage of their home, and occasionally drive it around the urban area where they live in South-Western Ontario. Diego is an only-child.

Diego and his family first learned about Student Links through their involvement with Community Living Ontario. They got connected with Blake, another car enthusiast, who lives in the same city, during the spring of 2020. At the time of the mentorship, Blake was studying to become a teacher. He had applied to become a mentor through a city-wide volunteer platform when his summer job was cancelled due to the pandemic. Blake and Diego were sometimes joined online by a second mentor, Marc – another car enthusiast and college student who contributed to the conversation. Blake and Marc were committed mentors who always kept the conversation upbeat. While their mentorship model was unique, two mentors and one student meant the conversations were always dynamic; someone always had something to share such as a new car that they had seen on the street.

Diego, Blake, and Marc have never met in person. During the spring and summer of 2020, they met online every week for an hour. To ensure everyone was organized, Blake took responsibility for communication and arranging meetings with all stakeholders. Diego's family set Diego up with an iPad so he could meet with Blake and Marc independently when his parents were at work.

At first, Diego, Blake and Marc talked about cars they liked or recently saw online or in the city: Mini Coopers, a McLaren 720S, or vintage cars they spotted like a classic Lamborghini or Chevy task force. A couple months into their mentorship, they were joined by Eva, a new Student Links coordinator. Together, they decided to channel Diego's love for cars into creating two Instagram accounts. On one account, Diego showcased his journey of fixing up the vintage car with his Dad. It included photographs of the engine, the body, ordered parts, and father and son working together. Diego's second account was inspired by a friend who hosted a similar account; it shared photographs of attractive cars he was drawn to. Most of the photos Diego took himself while out in the city. Each week Diego and his mentors would meet to talk about cars, their weekend, and what photos and hash-tags Diego would post next.

"I enjoy working on the [car] and just enjoy posting pictures on my Instagram. ... If I'm gonna be working on my Dad's [car] and I want to do something, I post something on that [Instagram] account. And then if I go for a walk and I see a nice sports car, I'll post it [on the other account]." – Diego, Student

During the pandemic, Diego's parents were often out of the house for work; so, connecting with Blake and Marc provided social interaction and connection during an isolating time. Diego's family always had safety at the top of their minds. Diego's mom Rosa joined for the first meetings, and after that, they usually met when Diego's parents were at work. Rosa commented that she always felt safe with the virtual mentorship, even though she had never met Blake and Marc in person. When asked what he was hoping for out of a mentorship, Diego shared that he was hoping to "meet new friends." His Mom, Rosa shared that while Diego has many friends, the mentorship provided him outside connections and opportunities to build new relationships during a time when he was often alone.

"I felt really like proud ... to say 'oh my son is at home on Zoom with his mentors, and he's alone.' And I felt really good about that. And, you know, I'm telling my co workers 'like we're really happy for Diego for doing that, right?'"
– Rosa, Family Member (Mom)

As the mentorship progressed, Diego's family witnessed him take on more independence. Often when prompted about school or other activities, Diego did not share much. In contrast, during the mentorship, his family witnessed Diego open-up and become more outgoing. He often shared details about his mentorship and his passion for cars during conversations at the end of the day. Connecting with mentors about shared passions provided positive reinforcement for Diego's hobbies and interests.

Diego's mentors also benefited from their connection with Diego. Blake went into the mentorship looking for volunteer experience but came out with a new friend.

"I learned a lot. ... [I have worked] with children, mostly much younger than Diego on the Autism spectrum. ... I was just looking for volunteer opportunities when I had, you know, lost the summer job that I had planned due to COVID. And this turned out to just be such a great learning experience. I made a new friend.... I think it was a really powerful experience."
– Blake, Mentor

Although the mentorship has formally wrapped up, Diego has stayed in touch with Blake and Marc. Due to the pandemic, they have never met in person however, they talk about meeting up one day at a car show. They stay in touch on a joint text chain and send photos back and forth of cars they see. Blake described that a genuine friendship came out of the mentorship. Diego continues to pursue his passion for cars. He always has his phone ready for a new shot.