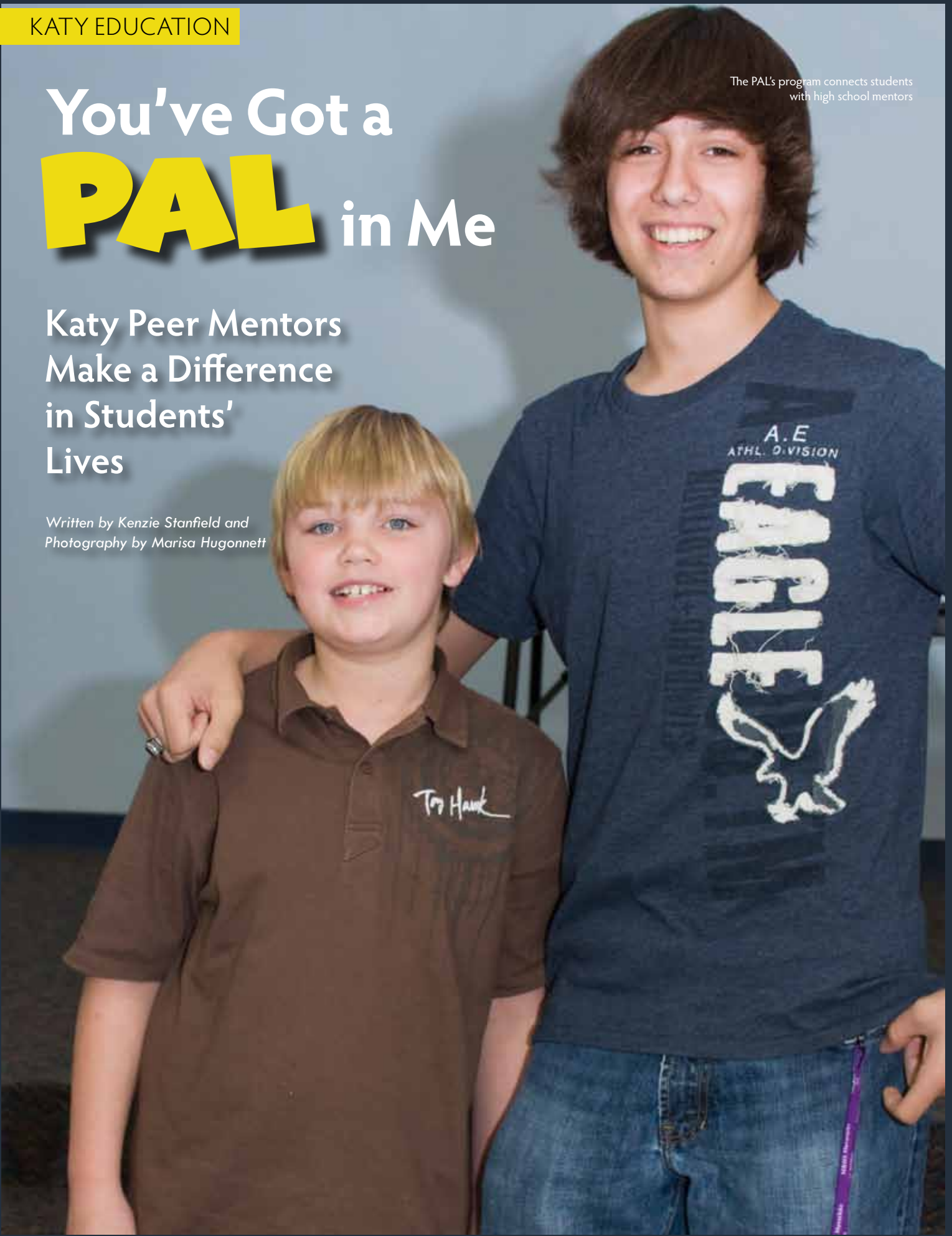


# You've Got a **PAL** in Me

The PAL's program connects students  
with high school mentors

## Katy Peer Mentors Make a Difference in Students' Lives

*Written by Kenzie Stanfield and  
Photography by Marisa Hugonnett*





A simple game of Uno or Connect Four with a high school PAL can make all the difference in a young student's life. Week after week at elementary and junior high schools throughout Katy, students eagerly await the arrival of their mentor and friend. Their PAL is a junior or senior Katy high school student enrolled in the Peer Assistance and Leadership program. The program matches mentors with students for one-on-one time once a week to help drive positive behavior, encourage valuable social skills, assist in academic success, foster improved self-image, and promote responsible decision making. The PAL program involves all of this and so much more.

## Supporting Students

The PAL program teaches high school students a peer-helping curriculum, explains Meg Henson, one of two PALs teachers at Morton Ranch High School. "[It is] a system of providing supportive services initiated by peers in diverse settings," she says. The program began in 1980 and combines the assistance and leadership aspects of mentoring with community volunteerism. As it has evolved and expanded, the program moved from an informal, extracurricular activity to a school-sponsored program accredited by the Texas Education Agency. The program's mission is simple: To help students make a difference in the lives of other students and in their communities.

## Becoming a PAL

Becoming a high school student mentor, or PAL, is a prestigious honor for each student selected to participate. "This is a hard program to get in to," says John Pham, a senior at Seven Lakes High School. "So many think it's just for transcripts, but it's really about being a leader." To become a PAL, students must go through an extensive process of nominations, completing an application, and interviews, and even then, not all students can be accepted. "Fewer than half the students that interviewed were able to be in the program this year," says Steve Womack, a PALs teacher at MRHS.

Although that might discourage some students from striving to become a PAL, the teachers hold firm to the process and assure that it is the only way to find the best mentors. "The selection of the PAL peer helpers is the single most important component for the implementation of a successful program," says Henson.

## Positive Role Models

In the fall of each new school year, once the PALs have been selected and are studying everything from communication skills to drug education and cultural awareness, most elementary and junior high feeder schools are beginning the process of selecting "PALee's", or younger students to be mentored. Teachers and counselors often nominate potential PALee's based on identified needs, whether they are academic, behavioral, or social in nature. "Our goal is to change the climate of the classroom in the schools we serve," says Tammy Ray, the PALs teacher at SLHS.

### PATH TO PEER MENTORING

#### 6 Steps for Becoming a PAL

1. Possess a desire to help others
2. Talk to current PALs and teachers about nominations
3. Attend the nomination meeting
4. Fill out an application
5. Interview with the PALs committee
6. Sign a PAL behavior and conduct contract

Parents should speak to a school counselor about enrolling their child as a PALee

Mentors learn peer-helping curriculum and serve as positive role models



Mentors meet with their PALee's once a week to play games and talk



PALs help students with all aspects of life, from doing well in school to making responsible decisions



Morton Ranch High School PALs include Gladis Velasquez, Monique Moreno, Ian Nickerson, Stephanie Ellis, Ashley McElmurry, Phillip Williams, Michelle Southerland, Eric Young, and Isabelle Falli

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Pairing students together is key to the climate shift, as the program aims to not only enhance the learning and development of the PALee's, but also allow the PAL mentors to grow and learn. "PAL's gives a child a chance to have a positive role model," says Elise Harrell, a senior at SLHS. "And it gives us a chance to be that role model."

## Creating Connections

Once the students are matched up, the peer helping begins and that is where the magic happens. Mentors travel three to four days a week to meet their different PALee's at the elementary or junior high schools where they attend. These get-togethers can include any number of activities ranging from playing an outdoor game of tag to completing a homework assignment or project. All of this is done to spark conversation and establish a connection. "In the beginning it's hard," says Ricky Piwonka, a senior at MRHS. "Some kids don't talk very much and you have to find a way to get them to open up. But the more you get to know them, the more they feel comfortable talking." The ultimate goal in all of this is to build a positive relationship. "It's about developing trust," assures Lauren Parks, a senior at SLHS. "We're doing something very special here."

The PAL's teachers and high school mentors throughout Katy ISD are confident of the difference they are making with each PALee, as well as the school at large. "We have a chance to make a big impact on their lives," says Lindsay Bryan of MRHS. Elise Harrell agrees. "We are here to encourage the kids to be all that they can be, to make good choices, and to do what's right." Visit [palusa.org](http://palusa.org). KM

*KENZIE STANFIELD is a mother of three and wife to her high school sweetheart, Dusty. She enjoys being a freelance writer for Katy Magazine.*

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Mentors pass on leadership skills to younger students

## TAKING THE LEAD

### PAL Leadership Activities

1. Mentor young students, serving as positive role models
2. Visit with seniors at area nursing homes every year
3. Volunteer at events at local elementary schools
4. Work at community events that help worthy causes

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