

# Mentors can make the difference

Groups like Tuesday's Children fill a need when a kid loses a parent

BY JOHN ASBURY  
john.asbury@newsday.com

Kai Gronenthal, 10, and his brother Finn, 7, shed their towels on a 20-degree January day at Walker Beach in Brightwaters and plunged into the freezing ocean.

"Only I'm crazy enough to do it," Kai said, anticipating the "22-Degree Run and Plunge" to support Operation VEST — Veterans Ending Suicide Together.

The Port Jefferson boys' father, U.S. Army Major Victor Gronenthal, battled post-traumatic stress disorder following tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, their mother said of her late husband. He took his own life seven years ago, she said.

Joining Kai and Finn at the Jan. 22 plunge: their mentors from a Long Island nonprofit founded after the Sept. 11 attacks to help children who lost a primary caregiver. The Manhasset-based Tuesday's Children is also part of a nationwide push to draw more attention to a shortage of adult mentors for children in need of one — made worse, advocates said, by the ongoing pandemic.

Brian Kanaley, 58, of Brightwaters, serves as Kai's mentor, while Owen Tierney, 60, of Locust Valley, does the same for Finn.

## Dad 'was a hero'

"It makes it easier to have them around, but the anniversary doesn't get any easier," the boys' mother, Erika Gronenthal said. "I'll be putting them to bed and suddenly they ask a question I didn't see coming, like they want their dad not to be dead. I just tell them he was a hero."

Tuesday's Children has served more than 10,000 children left behind after a primary caregiver's military death or suicide since

the 2001 terrorist attacks and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, said director Terry Sears.

The deadly coronavirus has led to an increased demand for mentors, she said. Across the country, 167,000 children have lost a primary caregiver to COVID-19, and 13,000 children lost their only caregiver to the disease, according to a December report released by the COVID Collaborative.

Without more mentorship and other programs nationally geared toward supporting families and children, Sears said, "it will cost more in the long run and be a challenge for decades to come. We're trying to help kids through a traumatic loss. During COVID, kids were unable to say goodbye."

Tuesday's Children partnered with the Boston-based MENTOR organization to send a letter in November — signed by more than a dozen other like-minded groups — to President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, asking for additional funding and federal support for trauma and counseling.

The letter stated that mentoring groups have addressed isolation for youth by creating friendships and long-term relationships with children in need during the pandemic, which it called "the greatest bereavement challenge our nation has faced since 9/11."

"We can attest that mentoring can make a real difference in the lives of grieving children and their families," the letter stated.

"Not only is there a shortage of behavioral mental health professionals nationwide and in communities hardest hit by the pandemic, but front line programs — such as nonprofits and schools . . . lack the capacity to



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Brothers Kai, 10, left, and Finn, 7, with their mom, Erika Gronenthal, at home in Port Jefferson. At left, the Gronenthal kids' mentors, Owen Tierney, of Locust Valley, left, and Brian Kanaley, of Brightwaters. The Manhasset-based nonprofit Tuesday's Children set up the Gronenthals with their mentors.

■ Video: [newsday.com/li](https://www.newsday.com/li)

sought out military groups to find mentors. Eventually she found Tuesday's Child.

Finn was paired with Tierney after asking for a mentor as a sixth birthday present. He had watched Kai bond with Kanaley as they would go fishing off the beach or to Legoland on weekends. Tierney said Finn even called him to show off his lost front tooth.

## 'Tough to lose a father'

"It's tough to lose a father and why not give back and make a difference," Tierney said. "Finn said, 'I don't have a dad,' but I told him, you have me, and he asked how long are you going to be my mentor? I told him I'll be your mentor as long as you want. It's not just to go have fun. It's also someone he can call and feel safe."

address the emerging and multi-dimensional needs of grieving families," advocates said in the letter to the White House.

## Vetted volunteers

Mentors with her organization are vetted, Sears said, based on their qualifications to work with Gold Star military families, victims of violence, or those lost during the pandemic.

They are screened through interviews and references, she said, in addition to background checks to eliminate any applicants with criminal records or on sex offender registries.

Mentors undergo training and must show strong communication skills, availability to meet in person and online, and be ap-

proved by the family and parent with whom they are matched.

The mentors receive no compensation from the organization and come at no cost to the families. The nonprofit covers all training and screening expenses, Sears said.

Those accepted into the mentorship program must be able to meet with a child about twice a month for at least a one-year commitment, Sears said, adding that the program has started "e-mentoring" to connect with children using video conferencing.

Gronenthal can attest to mentoring making difference.

After the death of her husband, and the family's return to Long Island from Hawaii where he had been stationed, she