Good evening ladies and gentlemen!! It’s always a pleasure to have the opportunity to get together with an enthusiastic group of people that are united in a worthy cause. Tonight is no exception. Those of you that know me are aware of how much my participation means to me and to my family, and that’s why being acknowledged tonight, as Childhelp’s Mentor of the Year is so special. I want to thank all of you for this generous recognition. Each year I have noticed that the days and weeks leading up to these annual functions are always filled with eager anticipation and I think tonight proves that practice makes perfect! Thanks to all of you who worked to make this year’s event so unique. I would especially like to thank our terrific neighbors, Christen and David James and their family for having the foresight and compassion… for all involved… to introduce me to this wonderful program.

I came to the United States to pursue my college education when I was just nineteen years old. I fell in love with Southern California ….after all… What’s NOT to love??? I decided to stay here in Orange County and make a life for myself. This incredible country provided me with the opportunity to build a successful career, find the woman who was to be my wife, and raise two fantastic sons. Of course, to complete the “American Dream” we had the great fortune to be “adopted” by Harley, the WONDERDOG. I worked very hard to reach my goals and create this great life and I never lost sight of the fact that the United States is truly a land of opportunity. I am always aware of how kind God has been to me and to my family. I felt I wanted to do something-to participate in some way in which I would also make a difference in someone’s… or several people’s lives. I began by writing checks… after all… every dollar counts when a community needs to benefit from outreach. I gave financial support to charities that I felt aligned with- those that supported my vision of a better life for others, among them Childhelp, but I knew, deep down inside, that I was capable of giving even more. I knew there were other ways in which I could have a deeper personal association to those that really needed an element of human connection. I also wanted my kids to participate and really appreciate all of the blessings we have in our lives, not the least of which is having the privilege to give back. Childhelp had a wonderful solution, and that was the Special Friends Program. It was through this program that I met Sean Tolliver, and all I can say is that HE has REALLY made a difference in my life and the lives of my family members. To say that Sean has been a BIG presence in our lives is an understatement. Expecting to meet a scrawny little kid, you can imagine my surprise when a strapping young man 6’3” tall, 195 pounds appeared. I instantly had a “Sandra Bullock ‘Blindside’” moment and a vision that I had possibly found a diamond in the rough… a potential athletic superstar. Well, we all know, the math is against us when it comes to cultivating a pro athlete so those thoughts were short lived. I knew my meeting Sean was for a greater purpose. Sean was terrific at sports but his academics needed work. Sean’s parents had spilt up when he was very young. His mother was an alcoholic and he barely knew his father. It was clear he needed constant, positive, caring reinforcement. Much to my gratification, I became Sean’s mentor and so our mutual adventure began.

Although we never lost sight of our priorities- the need for a quality education, we all loved it when we would get together on weekend afternoons. Sometimes it would be something as simple as having lunch and shooting hoops with the kids, Once in a while we’d do something special, and that became quite unforgettable for all of us. I can’t describe in words the look of joy on Sean’s face when we took him to his first Lakers Game on Christmas Day. His favorite basketball player is Lebron James, and that year we may have lost to the Miami **Heat** but it was still the **coolest** and best day ever. Mutual appreciation, respect, and consideration go a long way.

 My goal was for Sean to graduate from high school, get a job and continue his education. I am proud to say that he graduated from Costa Mesa High School this year; he is now working at Regal Cinemas, and is taking classes at Orange Coast Community College. It’s been such a gratifying experience- obviously for Sean and definitely for me. One of the highlights has been that my sons have seen what life is like for others and not just their circle of friends. They understand a little more of what it means to see the world through someone else’s eyes. They have learned so much through their connection to this Special Friend program while interacting with the kids at the Joann House and they have really experienced the feeling of making a difference that comes with giving back.

Believe me, it isn’t as easy as I may have made it sound. There are challenges in finding the means to forge a bond and to successfully and effectively enact the purpose of mentoring. I must say that although I have experienced my share of adrenaline rushes through certain successes in life and in the business world, there is nothing quite like the feeling of spending a great day bringing joy to someone who really needs to have a great day. And you know what? That kind of giving really does give back. I cannot help but smile when I see Sean’s smile…. and he also knows that if he needs someone to talk to, or to trust for advice, he has that too. It’s those “smaller” things that we tend to take for granted that mean so much to others.

Childhelp currently runs two group homes with twenty-four hour full time care and guidance for at risk youth in this community. These kids are well supervised but sometimes they need to feel a little special. They, as we all do, need to know that someone cares. Believe me, I understand that being a Special Friend is a big commitment. It takes time and attention and lots of personal investment. There are many, MANY at risk children who need our support …financially and emotionally. Childhelp has been there for so many, but the work is far from done. Think about all of the blessings you have in YOUR lives and think about these kids that really deserve a chance in this world. Your generosity gives these kids a glimpse of hope for a brighter future.

Before I go, I want to acknowledge a few more people who have been there for ME. They have endured my perpetual type A personality and they have supported my decisions and commitments more than I could have ever expected. It is because of them that I am able to give back to those who need me. To my wife Michelle and to my two incredible sons, Ethan and Evan, thank you for the human connection you have given to me and thank you for being with me on this great ride. I love you all! Thank you everyone!!