



Gavin Street and Sang Bui. With mentoring, 'the results are very big and the time put in is very little', Mr Street says

Leg-up for those needing a hand

GINA RUSHTON

SANG Bui recently graduated with a degree in solar engineering — a feat the son of a Vietnamese refugee said would not have been possible without mentor and friend Gavin Street.

Mr Street, a solar engineer, had volunteered for the Smith Family's tertiary mentoring program, which links disadvantaged students with experts in the student's chosen field of study.

"I could see right away he was interested," Mr Street said. "It was really nice to meet someone who was enthusiastic about the same industry that I was."

The pair met for coffee every so often and shared emails and calls. However, midway through his second year, disillusioned with his studies, Mr Bui decided to take a break. "It was really tough for me, I didn't know whether I should continue," he said. "I met up with Gavin and we had a talk. He told me that he had taken a year off his studies when he was younger too, which built my confidence."

Mr Bui eventually returned to

the University of NSW and finished his degree. In his final year, Mr Bui was invited by his mentor to an industry drinks night. Unbeknownst to Mr Street, Mr Bui took along copies of his university thesis. "Lo and behold, I got a phone call from Blair Pester from (solar industry giant) WINAICO," Mr Street said. "He tells me I've got to meet someone who could be a future leader in this industry and passes me this A4 piece of paper — and it is Sang's thesis topic."

The Smith Family assisted Mr Bui's family financially while he was in high school but his single mother — who arrived in Australia in 1984 — never told her children. "I didn't know that they had helped buy uniforms and books and I'm glad for that; I just felt like a normal kid," Mr Bui, 24, said.

Smith Family chief executive Lisa O'Brien said mentoring was crucial for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Smith Family has launched a search for 100 new mentors. "The great thing about mentoring is that ... the results are very big and the time put in is very little," Mr Street said.