Harris Cooper, Workforce Development lead at Commander, Fleet Readiness Centers, left, receives a letter of appreciation from Garry Newton, Naval Air Systems Command deputy commander, for being named the NAVAIR 2017 Mentor of the Year for Patuxent River during NAVAIR's National Mentoring Month event at Naval Air Station Patuxent River Jan. 30. Forty-seven mentors at nine NAVAIR locations were nominated, including 12 at Patuxent River. Each location had a mentor of the year award. (U.S. Navy photo)

NAVAL AIR SYSTEMS COMMAND, PATUXENT RIVER, Md. – Effective mentorship develops employees, helps them open doors and avoids pitfalls along the way. That describes the inspiration for Harris Cooper Jr., the Naval Air Systems Command (NAVAIR) Patuxent River 2017 Mentor of the Year. He was honored during a NAVAIR National Mentoring Month event held at Naval Air Station Patuxent River Jan. 30.

Harris was one of nine selected as mentors of the year. Overall, 47 mentors, including 12 at Patuxent River, representing nine NAVAIR locations were nominated.

“It’s important to give back whenever you can,” said Cooper, Workforce Development lead for Commander, Fleet Readiness Centers (COMFRC). “I enjoy being able to help people and to give them the benefit of my experience. If I can help folks benefit from the lessons I have learned, I think I owe that.”

Cooper said he spends up to four hours a week as a mentor, but most of that comes in 10-
to 15-minutes chunks.

“I have an open-door policy so people have this tendency to pop their head in my door and ask for personal or professional advice,” Cooper said. “I also walk around in my team’s work area and talk to them there. If I spend time mentoring and I have to stay later to finish my work, then it is worth it. I feel that as a senior leader I need to make them feel comfortable to bring their issues to me, big or small. I owe them that. When I got my first promotion in 1989, I made myself a promise to never forget where I came from.”

This management approach has been noticed.

“[Cooper’s] tremendous mentorship within our department and leadership within this command, across the NAVAIR competencies, and throughout the Naval Aviation Enterprise (NAE) has enabled the many successes enjoyed by our team tasked with the awesome responsibility of enabling warfighter readiness,” wrote John Turner, COMFRC Capability Management lead, in his nomination letter. “[His] sage guidance on, and investments in, the personnel and their development at COMFRC … has produced a capacity to succeed in a highly competitive human capital market. He teaches not what to think, but how to think.”

Cooper is also credited with developing a NAE-wide Depot Maintenance Apprenticeship Program to train and certify an anticipated 750 journey workers in the next five years, helping to create a stream of artisans for COMFRC to sustain and improve aviation readiness.

“This is an important program as we’re not only growing our workforce, we’re also growing our next generation of leaders,’ he said. “I’m an apprenticeship graduate myself, so I understand the value. If we take the time to invest in the apprentice, they’ll hopefully take the time to invest in us and our program.”

Like most good mentors, Cooper had mentors and friends who made an impression on him. One is retired colleague Bob Erwin.

“Bob and I traveled very similar paths, even though he was a couple of years ahead of me,” Cooper said. “We were both machinists who worked our way up. I even worked for him a couple of times. Even though he retired in 2007, I still seek his advice on occasion if for nothing else than to verify my thought patterns are solid.”

Cooper, who has worked at NAVAIR for more than 37 years, says he encourages people to educate themselves on the rules and regulations of what they are trying to do.

“Life throws you curve balls and you can’t and shouldn’t depend on anyone else to tell you the rules of play,” he said. “If you know the rules, then you should be able to figure out what battles are worth fighting and which ones to leave for another day. There is no substitute
Cooper said winning the award is a humbling experience and gives him the energy to keep offering advice. “This award is an honor and greatly appreciated, and I never thought I would actually win,” he said. “Being nominated showed me I must be doing something right.”

Three other Fleet Readiness Center team members received Mentor of the Year honors at their respective sites: Kristine Roberts, Fleet Readiness Center (FRC) East (Cherry Point, North Carolina); Donald A. Dunlap, FRC Southeast (Jacksonville, Florida); and Peter Muse, FRC Southwest (San Diego, California).