

Big Brothers Big Sisters program gives teen 'a friend for life'

- Tanya Manus Journal staff
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Sean Fulton (left) and Dominic Cogan pose with Dominic's first mule deer buck of 2017.
Courtesy photo

An anonymous donor has pledged to match the first \$100,000 donated by Dec. 31 to United Way of the Black Hills annual fundraising campaign. Every dollar given in the next few days can make twice as big an impact on people like Sean Fulton and Dominic Cogan, who became friends for life through the Big Brothers Big Sisters program.

Big Brothers Big Sisters is one of 55 nonprofit agencies that receive support from United Way of the Black Hills. United Way's goal for its 2017-18 fundraising campaign is \$2,317,000 for the Black Hills region, and 80 percent has been raised.

Karin Humar, marketing manager for United Way of the Black Hills, said donating any amount, especially before year's end, makes a difference. "Even \$20 counts. It all adds up," Humar said. "We're really trying to get the word out to people that the money does stay (local), and every little bit counts."

The Big Brothers program gave Dominic the chance to fulfill his desire to learn to hunt. His mother, Jessica, encouraged his interest but isn't a hunter herself. Then, she learned about South Dakota Youth Hunting Adventures, a program that pairs youths with experienced hunters who mentor the kids on hunting trips and help them develop hunting skills.

Mentors apply to participate in South Dakota Youth Hunting Adventures through the Big Brothers Big Sisters program, which screens and matches mentors and youths. Dominic was 12 when he and Fulton were matched in July 2014.

"I liked Sean because he hunts with a bow and arrow. He's cool. I was comfortable right away," Dominic said. "After (we were matched), I was shy for the first six months to a year, and after that I didn't stop talking."

"It was hard at first. We didn't communicate much, but one of best things when we are successful is he can't ever turn his smile off," Fulton said. "You can tell he had a really good time, and that's probably the best part about it. It's been pretty amazing to watch him grow as a person."

The two spend time together year-round, but especially during hunting season. They sometimes camp and canoe, as well as shoot geese, elk and deer. Two bucks are mounted and hanging on the Cogans' living room wall, Jessica said, and her freezer is full of game Dominic has hunted.

"Dominic gets to experience things that (I couldn't provide). I wouldn't take him hunting. I couldn't gut a deer," Jessica said. "Sean has shown Dominic some independence and responsibility."

Fulton's commitment to Dominic earned him "Mentor of the Year" award from South Dakota Youth Hunting Adventures.

Fulton also has taught Dominic to drive and has been a positive influence in helping Dominic stay focused on maintaining good grades, Jessica said. Dominic's goal is to become an internist and ultimately, a neurosurgeon.

Jessica also praised Fulton's wife, Andrea, who sometimes hunts with her husband and Dominic and who has welcomed Dominic into the couple's home.

"Sean is an amazing man and mentor. He has gone above and beyond for Dominic," Jessica said. "If Dom needs someone to talk to or advice, he knows he can go to Sean, anytime or anywhere, and Sean will set aside time to be there for him. ... If I needed Sean to talk to Dom about something that would be more related to a man, Sean would do it in a heartbeat."

"Thank you to everybody that donates to Big Brothers and United Way. If it wasn't for (them), I don't know that a lot of these kids would get to do what they do," Jessica said.

Dominic and Fulton both agree their friendship will last long after Dominic ages out of the Big Brothers program.

"I think (being a Big Brother) is a fantastic opportunity for anyone to create relationships and friendships and help others experience things they might not on their own," said Fulton, who believes mentoring Dominic has prepared him for becoming a parent in the future.

"I have a feeling I have a friend for life. I feel like I have a son now," Fulton said.

Dominic is one of many Black Hills residents who have benefitted from the services of multiple organizations that are supported by United Way; in addition to Big Brothers, he used go to the Club for Boys and played basketball at the YMCA. Community donations to United Way are especially vital this year because less government funding is available, Humar said.

All money raised is used locally to support nonprofits that promote better health, education and financial stability for thousands of Black Hills residents, Humar said.

To donate to United Way, text the keyword UWBH to 40403, send donations to United Way of the Black Hills, 6th St. Suite 100, Rapid City SD 57701, or go to unitedwayblackhills.org. If you know of someone who needs immediate assistance, call 2-1-1, a 24/7 operating Helpline Center.