

United Way: A Big Brothers Big Sisters Christmas tale

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Kamden Cloke, 10, tears up while chopping onions as "big brother" Heath Ruml teaches him how to make chili that they will hand out in downtown Rapid City. Ruml is a volunteer at the nonprofit organization Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Black Hills, which pairs young people with a mentor.

Craig Hudson, Journal staff

Editor's note: This is the latest in a series of profiles of United Way-backed agencies and the people they help.

Heath Ruml, 43, spent one Sunday morning this month teaching his "little brother" to make chili and peanut butter cookies.

In the kitchen of Ruml's three-bedroom house on Rapid City's west side, he showed 10-year-old Kamden Cloke how to chop onions and green peppers, as well as open cans of kidney beans and diced tomatoes using an electric can opener.

After Kamden stirred the ingredients into a simmering pot of deer meat, which Ruml hunted last year, the guys moved on to baking.

They balled up ready-made cookie dough and laid them on a baking sheet. Then Ruml showed the boy how to add some design by pressing the tines of a fork against the dough. Ruml's 6-year-old dog, Blue, a blue heeler (or Australian cattle dog), watched them from the dining room.

Ruml, a surgical assistant at Rapid City Regional Hospital, and Kamden, a fourth-grader at Canyon Lake Elementary, usually spend time together outdoors. Two to three times a month, they go hiking or caving, always accompanied by Blue.

Last month, they went with friends on a 500-mile day trip that included visiting Custer National Forest and Medicine Rocks State Park in Montana.

But that Dec. 11 morning at Ruml's home, the man thought it was important to show the boy the essence of the holiday season.

"The holiday season, the Christmas season, for me, and I used to teach my kids this, is more about giving and helping out," Ruml said. "I just thought it would be good for him to experience that."

Their plan was to go downtown that afternoon and hand out food to homeless people.

Ruml and Kamden met in March through the core mentoring program of Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Black Hills, a nonprofit group that aims to help children succeed and realize their potential. Part of the organization's half-million-dollar annual budget comes from the United Way of the Black Hills.

The goal of the mentoring program, which serves children ages 5 to 18, includes helping them perform well in school, avoid risky behavior and build better relationships.

Volunteers, called "Bigs," are asked to spend at least an hour each week with their child matches, or "Littles." The minimum commitment is one year, since the organization says studies have shown that short-lived relationships have a harmful effect on the Littles.

"If you're matched with a child for less than six months, it has a worse outcome than if the child has never been matched at all because it's just one more person who hasn't followed through with their commitment," said Nicole Burdick, the organization's executive director.

A criminal background check and personal references are part of the requirement for volunteers.

Rumel, a father of four, said he has always recognized the importance of working with children and was drawn to the work of Big Brothers Big Sisters. He joked that he volunteered because he needed someone "to pal around with" since his 16-year-old youngest child was gone all the time.

Kamden, meanwhile, had been waiting for a mentor since 2011, when he was 5. His mom, Shawna Meisman, signed him up with Big Brothers Big Sisters because she wanted the boy to have a positive male influence since his father was in jail.

Kamden's older sister had earlier found a mentor through the program, and the family saw its positive effects, said Meisman, an elementary school teacher in Rapid City.

Rumel started out with three potential matches. He chose Kamden, who had been on the waiting list the longest. (Other times, the organization does the matching up.)

Ruml plans his activities with Kamden in consultation with Meisman. In the nine months since the two met, Meisman said her son has become more open to new adventures and his confidence has grown.

"Just the fact that there are adults that follow through with their word, and he's got someone else to talk to besides Mom," she said. "He just loves the time with him."

Currently 47 boys are waiting for matches, versus 21 girls, so there's an urgent need for male volunteers, said Burdick. Big Brothers Big Sisters has been looking at different ways to attract more men to the program.

Outside First United Methodist Church, at the corner of Kansas City and Seventh streets, Kamden and Ruml took turns scooping their chili into plastic bowls and handing out cookies. Men, women and children, wrapped in heavy coats, stopped by for a free hot meal.

And Kamden and Ruml couldn't have been happier to do something together for the community.