

'Little brothers' still impacted by 'big brothers'

- Emily Niebrugge Journal staff
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Greg Vogel, left, and Ron McLaughin were matched nearly 30 years ago through Big Brother Big Sister Black Hills. Vogel was a ring bearer in McLaughlin's wedding and the pair still talks today.
Courtesy photo

When Pat Rotert returned in 2001 to the Black Hills, those who knew him years before in Sturgis probably expected the once-troubled kid to be something of a troubled adult.

But he was a changed person. He moved back to become the Spearfish police chief.

Rotert, still chief in Spearfish, represents the kind of magic Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Black Hills has performed in its 52 years of matching up youngsters needing help with older folks eager to provide it.

Mary Victor, director of the organization, recently heard two stories -- one was Rotert's -- that she keeps close to her heart.

"It's these type of long-term stories that come back and feed our soul and help us keep plugging along," she said. "We work on blind faith, hoping we're planting all the right seeds, and this is what brings it to fruition."

Pat Rotert and Gary Merkel

Rotert, whose parents separated when he was 11, said he had two options at that stage in life: continue down a wrong path or turn his life around for the better.

"My mom was working full time, my sisters are all working, so here's this 11-year-old kid who's making decisions that an 11-year-old kid shouldn't be making with no positive male role model," Rotert said recently. "In very short order, I was having troubles."

Then, through Big Brothers Big Sisters, he met Gary Merkel.

"At the time," Rotert said, "it was not this huge saving moment. But what it did was set me up to either take one of two routes. Either I was going to end up dead or in prison, or I was going to end up making some better choices. (Merkel) is one of two people who was that role model, just was there."

The other was Tim Drone, Rotert said, who was one of his teachers in high school and his wrestling coach.

Merkel, who got involved with Big Brothers Big Sisters while attending Black Hills State University, said he wanted to provide a positive male role model for someone who didn't have that.

He knew about such emptiness.

"Growing up, our family really had nothing," said Merkel, who lived without water or electricity as a child. "My dad was all about work and nothing else. So I never really had any other interaction with him other than getting up at 4 a.m. and working all day with the cows and then going to bed."

Merkel said that just as they were starting to form a better relationship, his father had a massive heart attack at the age 50 and died.

"I knew there were kids out there who didn't have dads, or dads who weren't involved," he said. "It was important that I could do that and help with that."

Rotert said what he learned from Merkel helped guide him to a life and career based on service, including volunteer coaching through middle and high school and serving on many volunteer organizations.

"As a preteen you don't appreciate anyone telling you what to do," said Rotert, a father of four. "It's funny as you get older, you become more mortal and start to look back at those moments and think 'I get it, I understand now why I remember that person so well, because they had such a huge impact on my life, even though I didn't know it until now.'"

When Merkel moved away, the two lost contact for years. But they recently reconnected and now stay in contact through social media.

"When I transferred to Hot Springs to the VA Hospital as a physical therapist, I saw someone walking down the hallway one day," Merkel said. "Then I saw it was Pat. He was a state trooper in Nebraska at that time, and I recognized him almost immediately. I'd lost track and hoped he turned out OK and was doing good things.

"And then sure enough, there he was."

Greg Vogel and Ron McLaughlin

Almost 30 years ago, Ron McLaughlin was looking for an opportunity to love and needed something to do in his down time.

That opportunity came through 8-year-old Greg Vogel. His parents divorced when he was two, and he was living with his mom in Rapid City.

"I decided I was going to help a kid," McLaughlin said, "and he ended up helping me. It made me more of a loving man, more intentional about relationships. We didn't have that blood, we weren't forced into the same family because of our moms and dads, but we just grew."

That brotherhood lasted even after Vogel moved back to his hometown of Omaha after high school, with subsequent stops in Texas, Arizona and now Arkansas.

"He was always my big brother, and not just through Big Brothers," said Vogel, married and a new father. "I've known him longer than his wife has, and I was there when his kids were all born. I'm even friends with his oldest daughter. He's part of my family, and I'm a part of his."

But that relationship, built on such simple activities as going for ice cream after Vogel's youth baseball games, didn't just happen. It's intentional, McLaughlin said, and that means picking up the phone and making an effort to stay a part of someone's life.

"Life happens," he said. "He graduates, goes to college, he's in Arizona for a while, he's in Texas for a while, but we're always staying in touch. It became a few phone calls, maybe a phone call a month, maybe seeing him a couple times a year."

That time commitment is really what sets apart a healthy relationship for those in Big Brothers Big Sisters, Victor said.

"Many people want to volunteer an hour here or an hour there, but this is about commitment to a child," she said. "These kids are looking for somebody to attach to, and

sometimes mentors don't realize that just spending time with a kid is the most important thing they can do. Every word they say is important to that child."

"I wouldn't be who I am today without him," Vogel said. "Even today in my marriage and being a dad, there are certain things where I need some support and someone to talk to, and he's always there. He always has the right thing to say."

"Even my wife (Allyson) calls him and talks to him if she needs advice or is having a bad day."

Eight years ago, after working in the Air Force and then as a pharmaceutical salesman for 17 years, McLaughlin became a pastor.

He always hoped to have a role in Vogel's wedding -- he envisioned best man -- but Vogel surprised him. Four years ago, he asked McLaughlin, or "Woody," as he calls him, to perform the ceremony.

It was something of a full circle: Nearly 29 years ago, Vogel had been in McLaughlin's wedding, as the ring bearer.

"Once he became a pastor, we started to really connect more, and when I got married, my wife wanted me to become more spiritual. That tied perfectly to my and (McLaughlin's) relationship growing and him walking me through my path in life," Vogel said.

"To watch him grow was incredible," McLaughlin said. "We love each other, we're blood, we've got each other's back, but that's just more of a bond between Greg and I. Now we're trusting in the same God, we're speaking the same language. That was never an intention of any of this, but it bonds us even closer."

That 8-year-old yearning for a man to look up to, McLaughlin said, "made it really easy to learn how to love unconditionally."