

Mentors have made lasting impressions for 50 years

- Danie Koskan Journal correspondent
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Little Sister Kayla Harshman, center left, skates with her volunteer Big Sister Anya Olverson during a celebration for Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Black Hills' 50th anniversary at Main Street Square on Saturday, Jan. 21, 2012. Saturday's skate was sponsored by the Black Hills Noon Optimists Club. (Kristina Barker/Journal staff)



Shane Garcia, 10, left, and Shawn Graham, 13, play cards during a Campus Kids night at South Dakota School of Mines & Technology on Tuesday, Jan. 24, 2012. Campus Kids is a program for Big Brothers & Big Sisters of the Black Hills kid participants to work with Mines student volunteers. (Kristina Barker/Journal staff)

Mentoring a child isn't rocket science.

It's about simple pleasures: eating ice cream or flying a kite, playing catch or sharing a good read.

"It's pretty easy," said Mary Victor, executive director of Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Black Hills.

And it costs nothing but time.

"It's free," Victor said. "You just really need to like to spend time with a child."

Nearly 300 area volunteers with Big Brothers Big Sisters regularly invested that invaluable currency in youngsters' lives last year. It's a heartening figure muted only by the 50 or so faces who are still waiting for an adult to come alongside them.

"We are always looking for mentors," Victor said.

Or Bigs, if you care to use agency lingo. Spend any amount of time with the program, and you'll soon identify adult mentors as "Bigs" and their young friends as "Littles."

Thousands of Bigs and Littles have passed through agency doors over the last half-century. To recognize those enduring friendships and their lasting impressions, Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Black Hills is celebrating 50 years of pairing adults and children.

The month-long celebration coincides with National Mentoring Month, which serves to recognize mentors and inspire would-be volunteers to seek out mentoring opportunities.

Recruiting remains a big part of bringing men and women into the "Big" fold.

Jim White was asked to mentor a boy after he joined the agency's board of directors in 1995. A match with 13-year-old Danny followed. It provided this husband, father of two girls and brother to six sisters an opportunity to do "guy things" that didn't exactly wow the women in his life.

"I've been around women my whole life, so having another guy around was kind of fun," White said.

The Rapid City man learned a little something about "growing boys" in the course of two matches.

"They eat a lot," he said.

Whatever the pair had planned, White knew to first take his Little out to eat.

Several local fast food restaurants make it easier on Bigs' wallets by offering free and discounted items to matches.

Not all pairings look alike. Friendships don't always evolve between one adult and one child. Big Brothers Big Sisters pairs women with single mothers and children with families.

Vesta Johnson met her "daughter" through Big Brothers Big Sisters' Mother Mentor program.

The Rapid City woman pursued a match through the program 11 years ago. Her own girls were grown, but she still desired to invest in a young woman's life.

She and Andrea hit it off. They chatted often at each other's homes or over a cup of coffee. Andrea felt comfortable enough to share her frustrations with parenting. Sometimes Johnson offered bits of wisdom. More often she just listened.

Today, Andrea lives in Florida, but the pair still stay in touch. Johnson is proud of her young friend's personal and professional growth.

"It is profound to realize that your time made such a big impact, especially when you do so little for them," Johnson said. "She is like a daughter to me."

Gregg and Jena McNabb of Rapid City opted to provide a Big Family to a child about 12 years ago. Jena McNabb, a former case manager for Big Brothers Big Sisters, was keenly aware of the number of boys waiting to be matched, so the couple chose to mentor 9-year-old Cale Barber.

The McNabbs were expecting their first child at the time, but they always made time for their Little then. They still do today, even though the match closed several years ago on Barber's 18th birthday.

"Even though the match ended, it has never really ended," Gregg McNabb said. "He is still a part of our family."

Today, Barber is finishing his senior year at Northern Arizona University. The biology major plans to join the U.S. Army after graduation. He credits both his family and his Big Family for his success in and out of the classroom.

The McNabbs credit Barber with enriching their lives in ways they never imagined.

A few years into the match, the couple named their firstborn son Caden Cale in honor of their Little.

"Just to know that they thought that much of me and took the chance of naming one of their own kids after me, it meant a lot, especially now that I'm older and know the depth of it," Barber said.

Victor stresses Big Brothers Big Sisters aims to complement families' efforts to guide and nurture children.

Some moms and dads are going it alone. Perhaps their spouse died or the couple divorced.

Other parents are juggling multiple jobs to bring in more income, and work schedules leave little time to spend with children.

"There are some families who can't provide everything for their children," Victor said. "But this is a partnership, not a competition."

It's also a commitment. Volunteers need not hold a degree or even a job, but they must be committed.

Bigs are encouraged to spend a few hours a month connecting with Littles. There is an ongoing obligation that doesn't go on hiatus in the summer or break for holidays.

"You need to be dedicated," Victor said. "Don't do it until your heart tells you to."

Matches officially close upon a child's 18th birthday. Some dissolve before then due to children moving away or moving on. Other pairs may disband on paper, but the friendship continues, Victor said.

The organization's half-century milestone has given Big and Little alumni a platform to once again share how the program met a host of wishes. Some of those were obvious from the start. Others were more obscure and not fully realized until years into the match. Shy kids lost their timidity. Children who felt ostracized for their differences learned to embrace their uniqueness. Boys and girls who thought they didn't need a big brother or sister soon learned they couldn't live without their newest family member.

Bigs who assumed the sole purpose of mentoring was to improve a young person's life in retrospect realized their assumptions were only half right. A mentoring relationship, after all, goes both ways. Adults who give away that precious commodity called time tend receive more than they give.

"You think you are going to help a child, but in the long run it helps you, too," board member Tami Riddle-Schumacher said.