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Big Brothers Big Sisters: the importance of having someone in your corner

The challenges of a new school year are harder on some students. Lonely youngsters with a rough home life need support. But they don’t always know how or where to get it.

That’s where Big Brothers, Big Sisters enters the picture. For more than a century this non-profit has created one-to-one mentoring relationships designed to understand and empower.

The Big Brothers, Big Sisters branch in McKinley County, at 100 E. Aztec Ave., is such a place; where young people can find compassion and a listening ear.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Sarah Piano, of Gallup, has served as regional director of Big Brothers, Big Sisters Mountain Region for over 11 years.

“We need to invest in the youth, because they are our future,” Piano said Aug 28. “Every child

has to have a positive influence in their life.”

There are two mentoring programs that Big Brothers Big Sisters operates in McKinley County, community mentoring and school mentoring.

The community mentoring program allows enrolled youth to meet with their mentors several times a month across McKinley County and work on various projects. These projects can be either academic or recreational, according to Piano.

The mentors in this program are required to fill out an application with Big Brothers Big Sisters, meet for an interview, pass a national background check, and then have three references speak to their capability of being a mentor.

Big Brothers Big Sisters is a national nonprofit, so it is free to enter as a mentor, Piano added.

Then there is the school mentoring program, in which high school students at six local schools mentor elementary students on a weekly basis.

This program is held in Thoreau, Crownpoint, Tohatchi, Navajo, Rehoboth, and Zuni.

“The youth learn leadership skills and accountability, and have someone who is a positive influence in their life,” Piano said.

ACTIVITIES FOR MENTORS AND YOUTH

Piano said Big Brothers Big Sisters continually plans monthly events for local youth and their mentors. She said while these events are only open to those two groups, they occasionally hold mentor mixers where the community is invited to learn more about the program.

The most recent event, and one of two major fundraisers for the program, was the 10th Annual Golf Fore Kids’ Sake Tournament, held Aug. 17 at Fox Run Golf Course.

One-hundred-seventy-eight golfers participated in the tournament, and the program partnered with Marathon Refinery to put it together.

The other major fundraiser for Big Brothers Big Sisters is a bowling event they hold in April.

“All the money raised stays local,” Piano said.

When asked about how the enrolled young people feel about being paired with a mentor, Piano said she has noticed positive growth in each of the kids.

“They get better grades, get along better with their peers, become more outgoing and have more self-confidence,” she said. “The mentors open their eyes to new experiences, something they couldn’t have done before. That is a great thing.”

Piano said she knows this feeling because she worked previously as a mentor on two separate occasions, one lasting for six years and the other lasting two years.

“You’re doing something beyond yourself that’s helping the children,” she said. “It helps you in the end.”

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Once applicants pass the previously mentioned interview, background check, and reference check, Piano said the program staff looks over the kids enrolled in the program and finds the best match based on interests and personality traits.

Brittany Gutierrez, program specialist for Big Brothers Big Sisters, said their role is to support the child and the mentor through the process, and maintain contact between them.

“We’re helping the kids build positive relationships with their mentors,” Gutierrez said. “The whole point is to help kids who come from a rough home life or have endured a traumatic experience.”

The one requirement Piano emphasized was a mentor has to commit for at least one year, because a child in the program will likely want a regular source of support, which could be disrupted if the mentor were to suddenly move away while they’re in the program.

“Sometimes the mentorship can last longer, like five or six years,” Piano said. “It can turn into a lifelong friendship.”

WHY MENTORS MATTER

“The mentors show the kids new opportunities, tell them they’re important,” Piano said. “This is a job where we can make a difference.”

Gutierrez said while they are doing important work for the community, the organization seeks to maintain a pleasing atmosphere for the mentors and the children.

“When there is an issue, we do our best to maintain contact and help them overcome the issue,” she said. “It doesn’t feel like work, because we’re helping people.”

For more information on Big Brothers Big Sisters, including how to become a mentor, visit the Mountain Region office at 100 E. Aztec Ave. or call (505) 726-4285.