

Features

Friday, April 15th, 2011 | Posted by [Wendy Schultz](#)

Bigs of the year donate a valuable commodity — time



BIG SISTER of the year Heather Simons works at the Rolling Hills Church in El Dorado Hills. Democrat photo by Pat Dollins

It takes not only a big heart to mentor a child but consistency. This year's Big Brother and Big Sister of the Year, Heather Simons and Jim Cooke, have demonstrated both big hearts and a dependability of support for their "littles" and the Big Brothers Big Sisters of El Dorado County program.

"In choosing the Big Brother and Big Sister of the Year, we recognize the people who have been consistent in a child's life and made contributions that go above and beyond their job as a mentor," said Amber Henrichs, program director for Big Brothers Big Sisters of El Dorado County.

A passion for children

Big Sister of the Year Heather Simons has been a Big Sister since 2007 as a participant in the School Based Mentoring Program.

She has been matched with three Little Sisters and has been with her current Little, Angela, 12, since September of 2010.

Heather is the student ministries coordinator at Rolling Hills Church and actively promotes

the program within the church, referring several people to be mentors for at-risk children in the community.

Simons, 26, started mentoring with BBBS because of her passion for working with junior high students.

"I look back on my junior high years and know that I could have benefitted from having a mentor spend time with me each week," said Simons.

"I enjoy being able to spend time with students that can get overlooked by their peers and sometimes even by their families," she added. "Living in El Dorado Hills we can sometimes have a misconception that everyone is happy since we live in a wealthy area, but there are so many hurting people in our community."

Nice houses, nice cars and designer clothing can come at the cost of quality family time and healthy parent-child interactions said Simons.

“To be able to provide a healthy consistent relationship for maturing young women is a privilege that I can’t pass up,” she said.

“Heather was chosen Big Sister of the Year because she has been so consistent with every one of her ‘littles,’ meeting with them every week at their middle school until they moved on into high school,” said Henrichs. “In addition she’s the BBBS liaison with Rolling Hills Church and she helps with all of our fundraisers and events, arranges meeting spaces for BBBS in the church when we have conferences or luncheons and she actively promotes BBBS within the church. She gives us ‘bigs’ who are really interested in the program.”

Simons’ positive and uplifting attitude is appreciated by BBBS staff and she enjoys the challenge of working with children who require more patience than others.

Good match

Jim Cooke, Big Brother of the Year, has been matched with his little brother, Max, 14, for more than three years.

Cooke, a Big Brother through the Community Based Mentoring Program, is a bus driver for the El Dorado Union High School District and a retired auto finance and fleet sales manager.

He became aware of BBBS when his church targeted them as one of the local organizations to which the church could donate money for Thanksgiving dinners and for a Christmas tree and presents.

” BBBS asked me to be a Big Brother, but I thought I was too old. All my children were grown,” said Cooke, 58. “But the director said my life experiences and not having children at home who needed me made me the perfect age. I got hooked up with Max and I met with Debbie (Max’s mother) and Max and we got along.”

Being a Big Brother isn’t a part-time job, according to Cooke. “The commitment is for one year. We meet every week; sometimes every other week if there is a lot going on. It turned out to be a very good thing. Max has really matured.”

“He’s given me someone to hang out with on the weekends,” said Max who especially enjoys swimming with Jim at Happy Valley. “He’s a really nice guy.”

“He and Max have a wonderful relationship and Jim has never let him down,” said Henrichs. “Jim has been a consistent figure in Max’s life, helping him through the problems of middle school and through the trials in his life. Whether it’s weed whacking together or going to a King’s game, they have fun and they are comfortable with each other.”

Cooke brought Max on his bus route on “Take a Little to Work Day” and has also formed bonds of friendship with Max’s mother, becoming part of the family. Max and his mother, Debbie, have joined Cooke and his family for Thanksgiving and Christmas.

“I like the feeling that I’m making a positive contribution to a kid’s life,” said Cooke.

Actual awards will be given out in the fall, said Henrichs, but “we wanted to honor and recognize Jim and Heather’s contributions and their consistent support of the Big Brother Big Sister program.”

To learn more about being a Big Brother or Big Sister call 530-262-1222.

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