

Big Sisters, Everyday Heroes

Big Brothers Big Sisters provides caring support that can change lives.

BY JAN WELLIK
Contributed photos



“Little” Summer and her “Big,” Laurie Finn, enjoy area activities and each other’s company through Big Brothers Big Sisters 7 Rivers Region.

Being a hero can be as simple as teaching a child how to ride a bike. Heroes like Big Sister Laurie Finn are role models by being patient, being reliable and providing positive experiences for youth.

Big Brothers Big Sisters 7 Rivers Region matches adult mentors (Bigs) with at-risk youth 5 to 15 (Littles) in the La Crosse and Winona regions. Each youth is matched with an adult mentor, often of the same gender, to meet for one-on-one community activities and outings at least two times per month—though some matches, like Finn (Big) and Summer (Little) meet weekly for an afternoon of fun.

Kate Bickett, Community Relations Manager for Big Brothers Big Sisters 7 Rivers Region, said that many of the youth they serve come from single-parent households and low-income families. Currently, there are 140 matches in the 7 Rivers Region, with many volunteer mentors being women. However, about 70 to 75 youth are on a waiting list, and 90 percent of those are boys, waiting for a male mentor.

Mentors to youth

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA) is the oldest and largest youth mentoring organization in the United States, operating in every state.

Youth show improvement in seven outcomes areas as a result of having a mentor: parental trust, attitudes toward risky behaviors, grades, educational expectations, confidence in doing schoolwork, sense of belonging among peers and the presence of a special adult, according to the 2018 BBBSA annual report. “Being matched with a Big can help a child strengthen peer relationships, aspire to achieve more in school and improve overall parent-child relationships,” the report says.

“These kids really need mentors; that’s why they’re here,” says Bickett, who is a 2019 communications graduate from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse and is responsible for event planning, public relations and marketing for the 7 Rivers Region branch.

“I appreciate that the work I am doing is going to something good,” she says.

The organization helps to have a positive impact on young people's lives through connection and support. A positive adult role model has three main components, according to Bickett: patience, commitment and fun.

"If Bigs have those (qualities), they will be good matches," she says.

Bigs undergo thorough background checks for safety and must commit to at least one year of mentorship, otherwise youth tend to feel abandoned by an inconsistent role model, she says.

Focusing on fun

Some local businesses offer discounts for mentors to take their Littles on outings such as bowling and movies. But simply sledding and baking together have been some of Finn and Summer's favorite outings together.

"The intent is, let's go have fun and explore and try something new," says Finn, who is owner of Finnotte's Nut & Chocolate Shop in La Crosse. "I want her to learn, but I don't want that to be the focus," she says. "I want it to be a result of what we're doing."

Finn has been Summer's mentor for three years and has watched her grow from a timid child to a more confident almost-11-year-old who likes to try new things.

With Finn's mentorship, Summer has learned how to swim and ride a bike.

They enjoy swimming, ice skating and making string art together. They have had special learning experiences that involve experimenting with ice cream floats and ringing bells for the Salvation Army.

"I put all my energy and heart into it," says Finn. "I want her to learn and have fun by exploring and having challenges."

Big Sister superpowers

Finn has two grown children of her own and "loads of grandkids," she says. She is the third oldest of 11 kids in her family and loves being with kids. She works six days a week at Finnotte's, the family business she has owned with her husband, Frank Finn, since 1986.

As for her desire to mentor, she says, "I knew I had the time and energy, and I knew there was a need."

Finn enjoys the special teaching moments and everyday experiences with Summer. "I benefit immensely from mentoring," she says. "Instead of being home on my time off, I'm sledding and swimming and having fun."

Summer benefits equally in the mentorship. "It's really fun to be with Laurie, and I like eating at her house," she says.

Summer has two siblings also matched with mentors, and she describes her outings with Finn as a chance to "have fun" and "try new things." The smile on Summer's face clearly shows how mentors can become heroes in young people's lives.

"Heroes save other people, and they have superpowers," says Summer.

For a positive role model like Finn, the superpowers of being patient, reliable and fun add up to a magic mix. 

Jan Wellik is a writer and educator based in the La Crosse area.

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**Ladwig Is
New Dahl
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*Heather Ladwig,
Dahl Automotive*

Dahl Automotive is proud to announce Heather Ladwig's recent promotion to Vice President of Human Resources. Ladwig is a tremendous asset to Dahl's Executive Leadership Team and dealerships—supporting, training, advising and championing its servant leadership culture. Graduating with a bachelor's degree in business from Viterbo in 2000, Ladwig majored in Human Resources and Business Management. She has worked in the HR field since 1999, has attained certification with the Professional Human Resources Association and is a member of the La Crosse Area Society for HR Management Chapter.



Trust Point Celebrates Award-Winning Culture

The La Crosse-based wealth management firm Trust Point has been awarded the Best Places to Work for the third year in a row by the Business Intelligence Group. This award identifies organizations improving performance by challenging employees in a fun and engaging work environment. Trust Point was honored for helping their employees accelerate their careers, knowledge and performance. Results were determined by employee survey questions on employee satisfaction.

Trust Point's team of compassionate and dedicated employees has built a company culture focused on doing what's right for clients, staff and the community ... and have fun doing it!

Want to experience the culture? Learn more at www.trustpointinc.com.



**Patty Barge
Named
Outstanding
Woman**

The Women's Fund of Greater La Crosse has named Patty Barge, founder of Amy's Closet, its 2020 Roberta Zurn Outstanding Women in Leadership Award winner. Amy's Closet, in Holmen, provides emergency supplies like clothing, hygiene products, toys and more to area women and families. Barge named the project for her late sister Amy, an advocate for children.

The Women's Fund provides grants to social service organizations that support women and girls in the Coulee Region. The annual Roberta Zurn Award, named for philanthropist and volunteer Roberta Zurn, is awarded to women in our community who have encouraged the advancement of women and girls.

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