



Mentoring works. I know this because I've been involved in mentoring for 27 years. In high school I was matched with a little sister and I saw the difference I made in her life. I saw it again with the little boy I mentored in the college mentoring program I coordinated. It's the same difference I've seen with the hundreds of volunteers I've supervised the past 21 years as part of the Centre County Youth Service Bureau's Big Brother Big Sister Program (BBBS). The last "child" I mentored is now married and supervising an AmeriCorps program in California.

What is a mentor? A mentor is a positive role model, someone to talk to, someone to count on, and someone who can help a child envision a future he could never envision for himself. Mentoring is about providing caring, supportive, stable relationships for children and young people who need guidance. Most people can't name the past five Presidents of the United States, the World Series MVP, or the last Nobel Peace Prize winner. But each of us can name that one person who helped us over that hurdle, that person who believed in us and helped us envision the person we were capable of becoming.

Take Jeremy, a nine year old boy living with his single-parent mom and sister in subsidized housing. He was an energetic child who struggled in school and with his self-confidence. Initially he wasn't so happy that his "big" turned out to be a girl instead of the Big Brother he was hoping for but his feelings soon changed. One day we were throwing a football on campus and a male student commented to Jeremy that "girls can't throw footballs." Jeremy's response reflected the growth in our relationship when he said, "Hey, you can't talk about my big sister like that. She can do anything!" And as our relationship strengthened, Jeremy began to believe the same thing about himself....that he could do anything.

Ask any Big Brother or Big Sister about his experience as a mentor and he'll speak about how he feels he's gained more from the program than the child gained from having him as a mentor. She'll tell you how powerful it is to watch a child grow in positive ways, knowing that she had a big part in that change. She'll tell you it's an experience that has enriched her life in ways she never imagined.

Mentoring is hard work and great mentoring relationships don't happen by magic. They take support from dedicated, professional staff who recruit, screen, train, and guide volunteers and who likewise provide support to families. We are fortunate to be a United Way agency. In times of funding uncertainties, United Way has been a stable, reliable source of funding for our program. Centre County United Way has been supporting Big Brothers Big Sisters for the past 25 years. When you support your local United Way, you give a child hope for the future and a friend for life.

Denise Herr McCann is Director of Mentoring Programs with the Centre County Youth Service Bureau and President of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Pennsylvania.