

Looking to make not only a difference in a child's life, but your own as well? Try being a

Big Brother / Big Sister

By ERIN KOREY
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The smile on her face goes from ear to ear, literally. There's no mistaking, Latrice is one happy seven-year-old.

And why not? She is spending the whole day with her role model, senior Louisa Meyer. On this brisk fall day, she spends the day collecting leaves and doing cartwheels with Meyer as part of the Big Brothers Big Sisters program of Forsyth County.

For the last two years, once a week, Meyer has been spending quality time with her little sister, Latrice. Of course she's not really her little sister, but the relationship they have formed is almost better than a sibling relationship: all the fun with none of the fighting.

In two years, Latrice and Louisa have

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done all the activities that a little kid would love to do. Painting, cooking, swimming, going to the movies, going for ice cream, and much more.

The important thing is not that they are doing fun activities, it's that Meyer is devoting all her attention to Latrice. This is one of the main goals of Big Brothers Big Sisters.

"Sometimes a hug and a smile from your brother or sister can make all the difference — just knowing there is someone there just for you — is what the program is all about," Meyer said.

All the children in the program come from single-parent homes where they seldom see their other parent. Most of the homes are headed by the mother.

Since most of the mothers work full time to support the family, they don't have time to take their children to the movies or for ice cream.

We try to help children realize the different opportunities that are out there that mom doesn't have time to do," Meyer said.

Part of the program that Meyer tries to especially emphasize with Latrice is the importance of school and learning. Meyer makes a point to ask Latrice about her studies each time she sees her. "I feel like I've made a difference if she can appreciate school and learning," Meyer said.

Meyer has visited Latrice's school to eat lunch with her and meet her friends. Sitting with Latrice and her friends, Latrice was able to "show off" her big sister to everyone.

Meyer was able to meet with her teacher

and hear first hand of Latrice's improvement.

"Her teacher told me about her improvement in front of Latrice and the smile on her face was amazing. It was from ear to ear. I could tell how proud she was of her accomplishments," Meyer said.

This is a big emphasis of the Big Brother Big Sister program; that the child will look to their brother or sister and be able to revel in his or her accomplishments.

In conjunction with the Big Brothers Big Sisters program of Forsyth County, the university helps students pair up with a young boy or girl to mentor. The only requirements for students are they must be either a sophomore or 21, be able to provide their own transportation and be able to make at least a one-year commitment. Besides that, everyone is welcomed and encouraged to participate in the program.

"The long term gain out of the program is huge. The child not only gains a role model, but you develop a meaningful and long term relationship with someone who looks up to you," said senior Anne Buffardi, the program's agency head.

When receiving a child in the program, the student and the child go through an extensive interview process to make a compatible match. Each student must have at least three outside references and a police record check.

Each child is interviewed to find out his interests and goals and to make sure they really want to participate in the program. The students have a more extensive interview where they have an office interview as well as a home visit. The office interview consists of a series of questions dealing with a wide array of issues including parents' beliefs, sexual preference and drug use.

Once the interview and home visit are completed, the student then is matched up with a child. The student goes to the child's home to meet with the parent and the child together. The student and the child then

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decide when they are going to meet.

For Meyer, the first meeting was a little awkward. "Latrice is really shy when you first get to meet her. But once she warms up to you, she opens up to you like a flower," she said.

"After the first meeting, she called me



Tripp Harrington



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Senior Louisa Meyer and her little sister Latrice share quality time on the Quad. Meyer likes to bring Latrice to the university and participate in activities around campus. "Coming to campus shows her a different side of life. She gets to see that learning is important," said Meyer. No matter what they do, Meyer is always there to listen to Latrice and guide her through her growing years.

every day after. After the initial excitement of having a big sister wore off, she just called me every so often to talk," Meyer said.

Meyer said that the relationship that is built through the Big Brother Big Sister program is one that you will take with you for life. By being a role model to one child, you can make all the difference in that child's life. What the child learns with its mentor lasts past every visit. They begin to prosper more in school and with their peers.

The program is meant to provide a one-on-one relationship between the student and the child. Once you get to college, you build your own family with peers and faculty, but you make a special bond with

your little sister," said Meyer.

Once a big brother or sister finishes school, it is up to him or her to keep in touch with the child.

Many times, the child is too young to write letters, so a phone call is the form of contact. Meyer said that when families move, the mentor is forgotten in the shuffle and contact is lost.

Meyer knows that she may very well lose contact with Latrice after graduation and some things just can't be helped. But that doesn't stop her from remembering the impact she has had on Latrice's life.

"I know I won't be able to be there to help answer her problems, but I can give her the tools to make good decisions in life and that's what she needs the most in the

long run," said Meyer.

The child is not the only one who benefits from the relationship. "For as much as you give to the child, you get that and much more back," Meyer said.

Right now there are dozens of children on a waiting-list, waiting to be paired up with a big brother or sister. The agency is especially looking for men to pair up with the little brothers.

Young boys living with their mother especially need a male role model to guide them. Students may have to talk with children about serious subjects like sex and drug use, according to Meyer.

"Change begins with the individual. Together we can make a lot of changes," Meyer said.

Interested?

To get involved:

call

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or

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Tripp Harrington