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The ties of Sisterhood Mentoring pays off

By JOHANNA CROSBY

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According to Big Brothers Big Sisters, research has shown that after 18 months of spending time with a program volunteer, Little Brothers and Little Sisters were 46 percent less likely to begin using illegal drugs 27 percent less likely to begin using alcohol 52 percent less likely to skip school one-third less likely to hit someone getting along better with their families

An outgoing children's librarian and a shy high school sophomore may not sound like a perfect match.

Then there's their 42-year age difference.

Yet Lynn Lesperance, 58, and Brittany Lyons, 16, have forged a tight friendship in the last seven years.

"It's more about making a connection with someone rather than about age," says Lesperance. "Everyone wants someone they are special to."

On May 1 Lesperance was named "2008 Big of the Year" by Big Brothers Big Sisters of Massachusetts Bay.

"I don't think I've done anything that deserved an award," she says. "We just hang out and have a good time together."

That's meant a lot to Brittany, of South Yarmouth, her Little Sister.

"She's a great Big Sister because she finds time to hang out with me," she says.

Lesperance was chosen because of "the quality of the relationship" and the "energy and commitment the two of them put into it," says John Pearson, president and CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Massachusetts Bay.

There are more than 3,000 Big and Little Brother/Sister matches throughout the state, including 243 matches on the Cape, according to Pearson.

The program promotes the healthy development of children through continuing one-on-one friendships with caring, responsible adults who volunteer their time on a regular basis.

The need for Bigs is always great, Pearson says. On the Cape 150 children are waiting to be matched.

Married with two grown daughters, Lesperance, of Yarmouthport, volunteered to be a Big Sister seven years ago "because I still wanted a child in my life."

In the beginning she wasn't sure the match was going to work, because she's hard-of-hearing and Brittany has a speech-related learning disability. But both were willing to give it a try.

Communication hasn't been a problem. What was challenging was drawing the very shy Brittany out of her shell.

"I yakked her ear off," says Lesperance, laughing. "She talked back in self-defense."

Consistency also helped cement their bond. Lesperance showed up every week.

"They are more than Big Sister and Little Sister. They are best friends," says Brittany's mother, Elaine Gonet. "Lynn's part of our family."

A single, working parent, Gonet wanted Brittany to have a social outlet with another adult. Her two older daughters were matched and benefitted from their special one-on-one relationships with their Big Sisters.

Lesperance has helped Brittany, a student at Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School, with her academic challenges, Gonet says, and has introduced her to different interests.

Brittany's mother encouraged and supported their relationship, Lesperance says. "She told me how much Brittany loved our outings. That gave me the motivation to keep coming back."

Lesperance likes doing activities with Brittany she doesn't get to do with another adult. Brittany plays in the school orchestra and runs track. Lesperance attends her concerts and track meets.

"Brittany makes my life interesting," she says.

"The thing I love best about Brittany is that she always smiles when she sees me It's a great feeling And she laughs at my jokes."

They usually get together on Saturday afternoons. Their favorite activities include letterboxing (a treasure-hunt-style, outdoor quest using clues posted on the Internet), going to the movies, shopping at flea markets and going out for breakfast or dinner.

Their relationship has grown through the years.

"We converse on an adult level now," Lesperance says. "I think we will always be friends."

For more information call 1-888-412-BIGS or visit www.bigbrothersbigsisters.org.

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