



Kids and Adults Benefit from Big Brothers Big Sisters

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“Big Sister” Kristen Mueller-Semo and “Little Sister” Sierra, 7, skate together at the Pat O'Donnell Civic Center. During the summer, they go to the beach, pick berries and do art projects. (Submitted photo)

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IRONWOOD - Being a Big Sister lets Kristen Mueller-Semo enjoy the simple things of life.

Semo and her Little Sister, Sierra, 7, go to the Beach. (Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Western U.P. asks that children in its programs be referred to only by first name.) They pick berries. They ice skate. They do art projects.

"Saturday, we went sledding on the little hill in my yard," Semo said. Laughing, rolling in the snow - it was a blast, the longtime kindergarten teacher said. Semo and Sierra have been paired for 2 ½ years. They had an advantage over some pairs - Sierra was in Semo's class. "It's always easier when you know the child," Semo said. They waited until the end of the school year to start their Big and Little Sister friendship, she said, because it could have been awkward to do special outings with just one child from the class. Semo teaches 45 kindergarten students in morning and afternoon sessions at Sleight School. Her own children are in college.

During the school year, Semo and Sierra get together once a week, usually on the weekend, for a couple of hours. In summer, when school is out, they have more time for longer outings. "I love going to beaches. It seems silly to go to the beach by yourself," Semo said.

When Semo and Sierra started spending time together, the girl's sister and brother also were waiting for a Big Brother and Big Sister. Semo recruited a friend, Betsy Wesselhoft, to be Big Sister to Stephanie, and another teacher and her husband, Karen and Denny Damgard, to be "bigs" for Sean. Wesselhoft is now on the staff of Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Western U.P., overseeing these one-on-one traditional matches. She has been Stephanie's Big Sister for 18 months.

She said seeing how much enjoyment Semo got out of the relationship with her Little Sister convinced her to sign up. "I decided a year before I retired that that was one of the things I was absolutely going to do," she said. She and Stephanie, 10, pick berries, ice skate, make collages, bake and play lots of word games. They also do group outings with Stephanie's siblings and their "bigs." And if some of the adults are out of town, the others include the siblings in their activities.

"It's great for the kids, and it's great for the grownups that do it," Semo said. "I think we all get something out of it."