



Paul Campos, 24, and Carl Coolidge, 51, were matched in the Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Columbia Gorge program more than 10 years ago and remain friends today.

In Search of Good Siblings

With more than 20 children waiting, Big Brothers Big Sisters wants you

By Drew Myron

Beef jerky and a mentor can change your life.

Brought together by Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Columbia Gorge, Paul Campos was 13 when he met his mentor, Carl Coolidge. Now “brothers” for more than 10 years, Paul still recalls the day they made jerky.

“He had a smoker and everything,” says Paul, with wide-eyed recollection. “We had huge bags of jerky. And we’d go fishing and hiking. These were new things to me. It was great.”

Raised by a working mother in a busy home of eight children, Paul was in danger of veering off track in the tumult of his teen years. His grades and attitude suffered.

Looking to provide Paul with a positive male role model, his mother turned to Big Brothers and found Carl, a man with a head for business, a heart for children and a few hours each week to share with a youngster.

It was a great match. With Carl’s steady presence and encouragement, Paul became the first in his

family to graduate high school.

Now 24, Paul works at the lumber mill in Bingen, has his own apartment in White Salmon, earned his driver’s license, bought a truck and plans to attend community college. He is also dating a woman who, he says, is “Carl-approved.”

Easy to Match

Partnering with parents, schools and community groups, Big Brothers Big Sisters pairs children—dubbed “littles”—with screened volunteer mentors—called “bigs”—and monitors and supports them in one-to-one matches.

Locally, youth in the program come from communities in Klickitat, Wasco and Hood River counties. Many are from single-parent and low-income homes, are between the ages of 6 and 14, and benefit from a consistent, positive role model, says Justine Ziegler, Big Brothers Big Sisters match coordinator for Klickitat County and Hood River.

Being a Big Brother and helping create a success



Carl and Paul stand in front of Paul's truck, bought following several benchmarks of success: graduation, employment and living independently.

story like Paul's does not take a huge amount of money or effort, notes Carl, who was raised in Klickitat and owns Canyon Market.

"It's so easy to do," he says. "It takes just one to two hours a week, and there's no expense. You don't have to be a scientist. The kids just want to be with someone positive."

Children Waiting

With more than 20 children waiting for a mentor, Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Columbia Gorge is looking for a batch of good men. Female volunteers outnumber male volunteers by three to one. The organization has an abundance of boys in need of positive male role models.

"I've had kids on my waiting list for two years," Justine says.

Her list includes boys and girls ages 6 to 15. The average age is 10 to 12 years.

"It's really hard to meet with a kid and a parent who is excited to have a match, and then tell them, 'You're going to be on our wait list,'" Justine says.

Mentor Support

Volunteers must be at least 18 years old, have a driver's license, a vehicle and proof of insurance. Every volunteer is screened for a criminal background.

"We're looking for adults that have a heart for kids or are children at heart," Justine says.

Rather than expensive outings, bigs and littles are encouraged to do everyday things, such as walks,

talks and bike rides. Some enjoy a hobby together, such as sewing, puzzles or painting.

"Share the gift of time and friendship, rather than things," Justine says.

More than 100 Years

Big Brothers began in 1904 by a court clerk who believed caring adults could help reduce the number of troubled boys coming through his courtroom.

At the same time, a women's group was befriending girls coming through the New York Children's Court. In 1977, the two groups joined forces to become Big Brothers Big Sisters.

Today, the nonprofit organization is the largest volunteer-supported mentoring network in the nation, and operates in 50 states and 12 countries. There are more than 600,000 participants, including mentors, mentees and the children's parents/guardians.

Making a Difference

Studies—and parent feedback—show that mentor programs improve a child's academic performance, self-confidence and social skills, while lessening the likelihood of drug and alcohol use.

And mentors benefit from a sense of connection and purpose.

"You're making an impact on a child's life," explains Carl.

Paul agrees.

"It's a good thing when you have positive people in your life," he says. "I'm now giving my little brothers the same lectures Carl gave me."

"Lectures?" Carl asks, raising a brow and smiling.

Paul admits he observes his mentor's every move.

"I copy how Carl carries himself," he says. "I used to hang my head down. I wouldn't look people in the eye. I was so immature."

Now, as an adult, Paul realizes Carl's friendship has changed his life.

"I see kids I used to hang out with, and I see what could have happened," he says. "Some people steer you the right way and give you a moral compass."

While Big Brother and Sister pairings officially end at age 18, Carl and Paul are linked for life.

"I've told Carl things I didn't tell my own mother," says Paul.

Carl nods, adding, "We'll keep in touch forever." ■

For more information, call Justine Ziegler, (541) 436-0309, or go to www.nextdoorinc.org/big-brothers-big-sisters.