

26th UNIVERSITY MEDICAL CENTER El Tour de Tucson

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Big Brothers Big Sisters of Tucson

Ride Big for a 'Little'

Children who lack role models find them through Big Brothers Big Sisters of Tucson. The nonprofit provides high quality mentoring on a one-to-one basis to children at risk.

"We match a Big Brother or Big Sister to one 'Little,'" Elizabeth Campbell, vice president of Development and Marketing, said, referring to the adult-child mentoring relationship. The Big Brothers Big Sisters program helps create better self confidence, builds positive relationship skills, decreases alcohol and drug use, and improves school performance, according to Campbell. "The 'Bigs' (as mentors are called) really make a difference in the kids' lives."

Currently, more than 500 children benefit from Big Brothers Big Sisters of Tucson. This will be the organization's first year as a beneficiary of El Tour.

"We're very excited about being part of El Tour," Campbell said. "Several of our matches plan to ride in El Tour and have already started training." Big Brothers Big Sisters of Tucson has sponsored three training rides so far as part of their organized "Sports Buddies Program," and had planned at least two more before El Tour.

"All the training rides have been held along the Rillito River Bike Path and participants ride anywhere from 10 to 20 miles," noted Campbell.

Larry Robinson and Linda Kurick, along with their Little, 13-year old Joselin, have been busy training for this year's El Tour. "This will be Joselin's third year participating," Robinson said. Kurick and Robinson are a Big Couple in the organization and have been matched with Joselin for two and a half years.

Kurick wanted to be a mentor in Big Brothers Big Sisters, and give back to an organization that has helped her so much. "When I was getting a divorce my 15-year old daughter Sarah was floundering," Kurick said. "She wasn't talking very much to me and I was scared for her." She turned to Big Brothers Big Sisters and "they matched Sarah with a wonderful Big Sister who really helped both me and my daughter during a difficult time." Kurick was grateful for Sarah's Big in teaching her "how to be a member of the community and to reinforce appropriate behavior." Kurick believes that sometimes kids need someone outside the family to unconditionally listen to them, and a Big Sister was her someone.

Schools typically refer children to Big Brothers Big Sisters of Tucson. "They are children at-risk, and come from families and economic situations that create a lot of stress in their lives," Campbell said. Children usually enter the program at age 10. "Often times the kids are from a single parent household and could really benefit from seeing another adult role model."



Joceline, center with her "Bigs," Linda Kurick and Larry Robinson.
Photo courtesy Big Brothers Big Sisters of Tucson

Becoming a mentor takes several months, Campbell says. "The process includes a background check, filling out an application, and an interview." The organization requests that the prospective mentor commit to participating in the program for a year. Creating a match is based on "things they (child and mentor) like to do, where they live, and their personalities," Campbell said.

Big Brothers Big Sisters offers two programs: Site Based and Community Based. In the Site-Based program, the mentor meets with the child at school. "The Bigs help with homework, play sports, or just hang out together," Campbell said. In the Community-Based program, the "Bigs and Little's get together on their own." They typically meet once or twice a month, according to Campbell. The Organization also offers structured events, such as training for El Tour, "to help get over any hurdles," in relationship building between the mentor and his or her Little. "Instead of the matches sitting around and thinking up activities, they can ride their bikes together," Campbell said.

Kurick offers her Little Joselin the stability her own daughter once needed. "We help make her world safer," Robinson said about their relationship with Joselin. "We offer a viewpoint from a different set of eyes." They see Joselin at least twice a month and "get some exercise. We show her there are other things to do besides sitting around and playing video games."

Kurick and Robinson introduced Joselin to cycling. As El Tour approaches, "we've been training together," Robinson said. "We'll ride 25 - 40 miles and then go out for ice cream afterwards." This year, Joselin and Kurick will participate in the 66-mile ride, and Robinson will ride in the century.

Kurick and Robinson both have grown children and are familiar with the challenges teenagers face.

"Middle school was hell for my two kids," Robinson said. "It's such a rough time in a kid's life. It's been neat seeing Joselin work hard and hang in there." Robinson proudly notes that Joselin is on her school's honor roll.

Participating in Big Brothers Big

Sisters is "life changing for both the kids and the mentors," Campbell said. "Our matches typically last close to two years, but we've had some Bigs and Littles build life-long friendships." Big Brother Big Sisters of Tucson will celebrate its 45th

By Lisa K. Harris

year this year. "I know of one Big Brother-Little Brother match that's been friends for more than 30 years," Campbell said.

Robinson believes he and Kurick will be part of Joselin's life for years to come. "I've told her that if she continues being on the honor roll throughout high school, we'll take her to Hawaii to celebrate," Robinson said. "She's part of our family and we're part of her family as well."

Kurick hopes that more people can come forward to share their hearts with struggling teens who need guidance and camaraderie. "I can't help the whole world, but I can help one child."

To make a difference in a kid's life or sign up to ride for the organization in El Tour, contact Big Brothers Big Sisters of Tucson at Tucsonbigs.org or call (520) 624-2447.

Lisa K. Harris is a Tucson-based freelance writer.



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