

Today's Family

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The ties that bind

Big and little sisters bond through common interests and helping others

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Today's Family Writer

"It was a sign from God," says Shannon Marucci about being a Big Sister. And she means that in the literal sense. "I was driving home from work one day and was behind a Laketran bus with a big sign on the back that read, 'You Can Be a Big Sister.' I took that as God's way of saying you need to do this! So I called right away and told them their signs are working," she added with a laugh.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Northeast Ohio, based in Painesville, is an organization that provides young people, ages 8 through 15, with quality mentoring relationships to help them reach their potential through positive friendships.

Shannon, 24, a YMCA youth program supervisor, says that day two years ago wasn't the first time she'd thought about becoming a Big Sister, but the sign pushed her to follow through on it. "And I'm so glad I did because as soon as I met Courtney, we hit it off right way. I just love her. She's going to be my junior bridesmaid when I get married. As far as I'm concerned, she's my real little sister."

Courtney, who turns 11 this month, feels exactly the same way. "Shannon's got a great personality and we have lots of fun together," she says. "We talk a lot and do a lot of stuff together, mostly outside, because we like being outside. We also go to the zoo 'cause we both like animals."

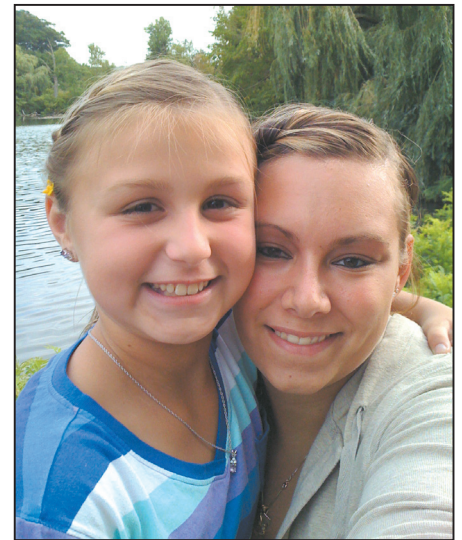
As Courtney implies, having common interests is an important consideration

when it comes to matching up the Bigs and Littles (as they're called). The agency takes pride in bringing together those with similar personalities who enjoy doing the same things. As a result, there are many success stories, including relationships that last years after the program ends. The organization also stresses that spending money on the children is not a requirement. Bigs are in fact encouraged to seek out activities that require little or no money, such as shooting hoops at a park, riding bikes, playing games together, or simply sharing a pizza. It is the quality time spent together that's important.

With Shannon and Courtney, some of that quality time has been spent helping others. "We take gift and food baskets to people who don't have a lot of money," Courtney says. "I love seeing the people faces, they're all smiling and so happy. Last Thanksgiving we helped serve food at a soup kitchen, and that was really fun."

"I'm big into volunteering," Shannon says. "So it's important to me to take her with me so she sees that even though she's had some tough times, there are others who have it worse. We also go to a housing district once a month and play with the kids there. Courtney loves that." Shannon also takes her Little Sister to her church at Prince of Peace in Mentor.

While many Littles live with just one parent, Courtney lives with both of her natural parents. "Our family's been through some difficult times," says her mother, Susan, who adds that their other daughter, Julia, also has a Big Sister. "My husband and I felt this program would be



Courtney and Shannon

good for our girls. And I tell you, it's been a real godsend. Shannon is such a good person. I am so very grateful to have her in my daughter's life."

Shannon agrees that their relationship is truly a mutual admiration society. "Courtney is an amazing little girl. She's so smart and fun to be with. I couldn't imagine being matched up with anyone else. One little cute thing we do is, at the end of our conversations or when I'm dropping her off, I'll say, 'I love you,' and she always replies, 'I love you more.' It's so awesome to have her in my life and I thank God every day for her."

To be a Big Brother or Big Sister, contact the Painesville Administrative Office at 8 North State Street, Suite 360, Painesville, Ohio 44077, call 440-352-2526, or visit www.bbbsneo.org.