

Big Brothers Big Sisters: Good matches can last a lifetime



Mike Peek tries a hook shot while playing basketball with Felix Merback at the Southeast YMCA. They have a relationship created through Big Brothers Big Sisters. David Snodgrass | Herald-Times

The match support specialist had found the perfect “Little Brother” for Mike Peek.

The 14-year-old Mark Volland had in mind for Peek had a tough home life and a tendency to lash out at authority figures. But the boy was smart, a big basketball fan and full of untapped potential.

It’s too bad, Peek razzed his “Little,” that he got stuck with Felix Merback instead of that perfect kid. Merback, now a 17-year-old senior at Bloomington High School North, laughed and rolled his eyes.

“He was a very likable kid at the outset,” Peek said of Merback. “It’s been such a rewarding experience to see over the last three years how much he’s grown.”

Merback is a triplet, but his relationship with his nonblood-related big brother is special. Three years after being paired through Big Brothers

Big Sisters of South Central Indiana, Peek and Merback's relationship has evolved from that of mentor and mentee to friends as close as family.

Despite their age gap, the two have found common ground in their love of basketball, movies and politics. Thursday evening, the two planned to watch the Indiana University basketball game against the University of Illinois, followed by the Republican debate.

"There's never a shortage of things to talk about when it comes to Mike," Merback said. "(Peek's) just been an amazing, amazing friend. I needed that mentor type in my life."

Out of Big Brothers Big Sisters of South Central Indiana's 144 matches, the United Way agency named Peek Monroe County's Big Brother of the Year for his role in shaping Merback's adolescence. Match support specialists try to connect adult mentors to children with common interests. But what's most important in a match is its ability to last, said Voland, now the executive director of BBBS.

"We really want to try to make a match where it could last through the rest of that teen's academic time, so the Big could really be there when the Little graduates from high school," Voland said. "Mike's been there the whole time. I think Mike feels like he's a part of Felix's family, and I know Mike has made Felix a part of his family as well."

For more than five years, Julie Liersch has felt the same way about her Little Sister, Kaitlyn Reynolds. Liersch was matched with 12-year-old Kaitlyn when her Little was 7 years old, and as Kaitlyn has graduated from elementary school to middle school, the Big Sister of the Year said she has learned alongside her.

"She taught me how to be selfless, how to ... have a child's perspective on things and just enjoy life," Liersch said. "We've gotten to see each other grow over the years."

In Big Brothers Big Sisters, the community-based program in which Peek and Liersch volunteer, adults agree to a one-year match with a child or young adults ages 6 to 17. Other programs connect children to adult mentors at schools or at group activities, when volunteers can interact with the kids on the waiting list to be matched with a Big. There are currently 80 kids with Big Brothers Big Sisters of South Central Indiana waiting for matches, Voland said.

"Every kid has some challenges, and every kid needs a little extra support, and that's what Big Brothers Big Sisters is about," he said.

Liersch and Kaitlyn spend their time together hiking, playing board games and cooking. Peek and Merback will go to the Monroe County

YMCA to shoot hoops, and Merback said his Big Brother has always been there when he's needed help dealing with school, bullying and mental health.

"This is honestly one of the best tools I've had in my life," Merback said.

Merback will age out of the Big Brothers Big Sisters program when he graduates from high school this spring, but Voland bets that the pair will continue a lifelong friendship. And Peek will be able to see Merback continue to progress, as the teen plans to attend IU to follow his passion for theater.

"His grades are great," Peek said. "And he's a little bit better basketball player."

United Way of Monroe County campaign highlights For Week Ending Friday:

- The Herald-Times, along with sponsoring this update each week, is reporting employee donations of \$4,390 to help our community thrive.
- Macy's employees are bringing their magic to this year's campaign through \$1,910 in generous donations.
- Duke Energy staff made electrifying donations totaling \$2,878 to enhance the quality of life for all members of our community.

Impact:

Donations to United Way helped ensure that 80% of at-risk teens, victims of domestic violence, recovering addicts, and families living in transitional shelter moved into stable, affordable, safe housing from programs at United Way member agencies.

\$10/week supports a match relationship between a Big and Little brother or sister.

Bowl for Kids' Sake:

Big Brothers Big Sisters of South Central Indiana will hold its largest annual fundraising campaign March 5 and 6 at Classic Lanes. To start a Bowl team, register online at bfksindiana.com or call Brittany Slate at 812-334-2828, ext. 226. Teams of five to six players work to raise at least \$150 per player and a team total of \$750.