

Interview with Jean Nelson

Racine Co Child Support Worker and Big Brothers, Big Sisters Mentor

1. Tell us briefly about your history as a mentor.

I started about three years ago with a 6th grader. It was kind of towards the end of her school year, around April, because I had come in towards the end of her mentoring season. I only saw her a few times before school was out, and then started her up again the next year and also for her 8th grade year. So it's been about three and a half years now.

For me it was initially a tough decision to make, because I had never done something like this before. I looked at it, because of my age and the generation gap between myself and these kids, and I thought that I might not "fit." The mentoring staff told me that the different things I have experienced as a grandmother could possibly be passed forward and shared as a mentor, so I thought about it and prayed, which guided me to give it a shot.

2. What drew you to mentoring youth?

We were both very shy in the beginning, which kind of drew us together. So we just started talking together, asking her about siblings and pets, and told her a little bit about myself as well. And we just sort of grew from there

3. You just sort of clicked.

Yeah, we just sort of clicked, and that really drew me into the experience.

4. What are some activities and things that you participated in with your mentee?

Well, with the school mentoring program, I would attend her school once a week and spend an hour with my mentee. Part of it was her lunch hour and part of it was her study hour, so we would eat our lunch together. I would bring my sandwich and a bag of chips and she would bring her lunch, and we'd go into a room and just eat lunch together. Then I'd try to help her with her homework, maybe go on the computer or look at some magazines sometimes. So basically it was just a chat session.

5. How did that change as your relationship developed?

Well now I'm no longer with the school mentoring program and am actually her big sister. I no longer go to the school, and now we can do things outside of school through Big Brothers, Big Sisters. I can spend more time whenever I want with her now.

6. How has working with your mentee impacted you?

She's a very easy going and fun young lady, so we developed a rapport with each other where she knows that she can tell me things without being judged. I'm there to guide her, and hopefully she'll be able to make the ultimate decision. She's built trust in me, which works both ways and now we have trust in each other.

7. What, in your opinion, makes a successful mentor/mentee relationship?

A successful relationship would be one that clicks, where you go in with open eyes and are ready to break the barrier. Being able to start a conversation and break the ice is a good start. You'd have to have your mind made up so you can just dive right in.

8. When do you see as the right point, where your job as a mentor has done its work and your mentee is ready to move on?

I don't know if you actually move on. Even after the program is over, now you have this adult person in your life that is a close friend. My little sister for example, I've seen her grow and mature in the last three and half years into a nice young lady. I think you should actually keep in contact with each other. Although I left the school program, I didn't want to give up the mentee that I had. I didn't want to start over again.

9. What is the most important piece of advice you can share with aspiring mentors?

My piece of advice is that you have to be yourself. There's no point in being something that you're not. If you try to be something that you're not, and you're putting up this façade with your mentee, then it can be misleading to them and have some negative consequences.