Michele and Jim Stoddard pose with their daughters Alissa and McKinzie as well as Zenaida, far left, who is also considered part of the Stoddard family. They met Zenaida through a “Match” with Big Brothers Big Sisters in Liberal 10 years ago. Courtesy photo

By VICTORIA CLADERON

• Leader & Times

Big Brothers Big Sisters is an organization dedicated to changing the lives of children everywhere. In the case of Zenaida, that’s exactly what happened. Ten years ago, she was put into the program as a Little, and hasn’t looked back since.

When Zenaida finished the second grade, she was introduced to her Big, Michele Stoddard. When the Match was first made, there were some worries regarding Zenaida’s parents: they

spoke Spanish only.

Despite the language barrier with Zenaida’s family, Stoddard still managed to become extremely close to Zenaida. From Friday night movies and pizza to TNT Tumbling, Stoddard included Zenaida into many aspects of her life.

“It was like no effort to keep it going. We just clicked,” Stoddard said.

Stoddard’s most tangible impact on Zenaida’s life, however, began with a reading challenge. Zenaida began the third grade with a first grade reading level. To help her improve, Stoddard set up an “AR store” to reward Zenaida with prizes every time she met a reading goal. By the end of that school year, Zenaida had moved up to a third grade reading level.

Stoddard’s help with academics didn’t stop there. At the beginning of the match, Zenaida was a C student. By the time Zenaida graduated with the class of 2013, she was a straight-A student because of the Big influence in her life. Even to this day, Stoddard encourages Zenaida to continue her education and attain at least an associate’s degree, if not more.

The growth seen in Zenaida doesn’t stop there, though. Her family even told Stoddard that she went from being a shy little girl who kept to herself to an outgoing, bubbly young woman.

At the beginning of the Match, Stoddard was mainly concerned with Zenaida’s go-with-the-flow, undeciding nature. The pair would go to restaurants, and when asked what she wanted to eat, Zenaida would reply “I don’t know” repeatedly.

Stoddard was afraid this lack of conviction would lead to Zenaida getting involved with gangs, because she would often just go with decisions others made for her. Through the Big program, Stoddard was able to teach Zenaida how to make the right choices and stand strong.

Despite the fact that the match was originally made between just Stoddard and Zenaida, the two

families became so close that the match far surpassed just the two of them. Stoddard’s family would help out with anything Zenaida’s family needed, such as buying the cake for her quinceñera. In return, Zenaida’s family taught the Stoddards things, like how to make tamales. Stoddard’s oldest daughter, Alyssa, became close friends with Zenaida, as well.

Although Zenaida showed the most improvement because of the relationship, Stoddard noticed her parents had grown as well. Zenaida’s mother learned English and got a full time job, and her father went from being a man whose only duty was to put food on the table to a father who is also nurturing and sociable.

Now that Zenaida is 18 and ineligible to continue as a Little, she still wishes to be involved with the program as a Big.

“I think it helps kids a lot,” she said about BBBS. “I think it’s a really good thing.”

And even though the Match has been officially closed, it’s not the end of the road for the relationship between Zenaida and Stoddard, or between their families.

“I care for her just as if she was my family,” Stoddard said. “I treat her just as if she was one of my daughters. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for her.”