

Relationship prepares Big and Little Sisters to move on

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Signing up with Big Brothers/Big Sisters should not make a person miserable. Yet for Big Sister Victoria Calderon and her Little, Cynthia, the experience culminated in just that — an intense experience participating in the Liberal High School production of the musical “Les Miserables.”

Calderon, who served as stage manager for the ambitious and well-received production, saw the experience as an opportunity to encourage and mentor Cynthia.



“I knew (the director) Gloria Goodwin needed children for the show, and I thought of Cynthia,” said Calderon. “I suggested it, and even though she was hesitant at first, it turned out great.”

Up to that point, the pair’s activities had centered on outdoor, just-for-fun activities. Participating in the musical felt more like an ambitious project, and Cynthia recalled the experience as one that required courage.

“At first, it was stage fright,” said the 10-year-old, who will enter fifth grade in the fall. “Vicky said it would be fun, and ‘Just look at your grandma if you feel scared.’ That’s what I did, and it worked.”

Like many Littles, Cynthia’s childhood has not been trouble-free. She’s being raised by her grandparents, along with a younger brother. In many ways, Cynthia presents herself as a typical girl, fond of bright colors, crafts, Disney Channel television shows. Yet she’s also guarded, as though she understands life can turn on a dime and disappoint.

Calderon, who is a big sister in real life, with two younger siblings at home, said she didn’t push serious talks during the pair’s one and a half years of mentoring.

“I knew about her background, but I didn’t want to dive into it. I knew the right thing was to take it easy, and that we would click if I gave it time,” Calderon said. “I can talk with my little sister and brother at home, so I relied on that experience and trusted that I would be able to move it over.”

Signing up to be a Big Sister was a big step for Calderon, too, she said.

“I first thought about it after I participated in a youth leadership conference in Wichita, the Hugh O’Brien Youth organization,” she said. “During that week, I realized that I wanted to be more involved in helping other people.”

The leadership group had worked with children from a variety of rough situations — homes where poverty, alcoholism, physical and emotional abuse, and the threat of homelessness were a daily reality.

“Yet the kids were so sweet, so polite. I couldn’t get over how they could be such amazing kids, with the circumstances they came from. I was inspired,” she said.

Back in Liberal, Calderon struggled with the idea that working with such children would be a much more difficult way to earn community service hours, required for high school graduation, than volunteering as a library aide or park clean-up worker.

“Honestly, I look back on it, and I think my attitude wasn’t that great,” she said. “I was going into my junior year, and I just needed community service hours. But that changed, and I changed.”

Despite her rigorous academic schedule — Calderon eventually earned the top spot as class valedictorian — she made time for Cynthia, and things began to shift.

“At first, I always had to initiate getting together,” she said. “We’re both busy. We’d do simple things like play ping-pong at the recreation center, eat snacks, or go to the water park.”

As time went on, “I realized that I was finding it easier to be patient, and to be generous. I tend to be a stingy person with my money, and my free time. I always used to watch every penny,” Calderon said. “With Cynthia, those things changed, and I feel good about that. The closer we got, the more I felt my perspective changing.”

Now, with high school behind her, Calderon is still considering the possibility of making social work part of her college education.

As for Cynthia, her Big Sister's departure for the University of Kansas comes at the perfect time: with her grandparents, she will be moving to Salina. Calderon is pleased that Cynthia won't be feeling abandoned, but will instead embark on new adventures of her own.

She already has the decor of her new room planned out: pink, purple and bright green, "with some zebra print."

"Those are good colors," said Calderon. "It sounds like my dorm room will probably look a lot like yours."

Big and Little Sister know what colors they like, but there are still unknowns. Calderon noted that "my room is going to be very crowded, because I will share it with three suite mates." Meanwhile, Cynthia struggles to imagine life in a different town.

"Salina is a little bigger than Liberal," Cynthia said, "and it's really big. There's a lot of traffic. Maybe a little less busy than New York, but you could put two Liberals in the town."

Cynthia said she worries about the usual transitional matters that concern school children: "That I'm not going to make enough friends. That I won't like it."

"Just be yourself," Calderon said. "Remember what I told you during Les Mis. Don't be afraid to put yourself out there. You are going to make a lot of friends."