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By VICTORIA CALDERON

- Leader & Times

For nearly six years, Big Brothers Big Sisters executive director Kerry Seibel has been matched to her Little, Ofelia.

Ofelia is a very funny, outspoken 10-year-old girl. She is a mostly A and B student, who will be starting fifth grade in the fall. However, she wasn't always this way.

"She kind of struggled with school. Now she's doing very well in school," Seibel observed about Ofelia's changes since she began the program. "She was even student of the month last year."



Ofelia's changes have also been noticed by her grandparents, who are her primary caretakers. Her grandmother Karen added, "She's been more outgoing since she's been with Kerry. She used to be really, really shy. I used to work out at Good Sam's; I'd take her out there and she'd hide behind me. She was always scared of people."

Seibel also realized that Ofelia did not like trying anything new or foreign. Through their time together, Seibel got her out of her comfort zone. The pair would try all sorts of new things, from food to activities. Seibel brings Ofelia to events in the community and helps her get involved.

The two do everything together: bowling, swimming, watching movies, going on out-of-town road trips, making crafts and even getting their hair cut. Seibel also knows it is important for Ofelia to be taught the same things she teaches her children, like respect, manners, staying out of trouble and attaining a college education.

As for Seibel's motivation for joining the Match program, it all started with the Big Brothers Big Sisters board. She served on the board when she realized she wanted to be more involved by becoming a Big Sister.

"That's when I chose Ofelia, and she's been a part of our family ever since," Seibel said.

Having a Little has benefitted Seibel's life in many ways. She said the most rewarding part was "experiencing new things, watching her develop. Knowing that she's changed. I get to experience firsthand what mentoring does for their lives, not only as a Big Sister, but as the director. I know that I see a lot of great matches, and I know that mine is one of them."

Ofelia isn't afraid to be herself and show her sassy (but grateful) attitude in front of Seibel. "Can we go to Garden City on Friday?" Ofelia asked when thinking about some of their favorite memories together.

Seibel added that her favorite memory from their Match was "the very first time we brought her to the house, and met the kids and the family and got to spend time together."

Seibel has high hopes for Ofelia's future.

"I told her that she needed to go to college and then travel the world," Seibel said.

“Travel to China, New York... Oklahoma,” Ofelia chipped in, the last getting laughter from her family and Seibel.

Their six-year Match anniversary is coming up on Aug. 1, which is a day after Ofelia’s 11th birthday.

“I always joke with her and tell her that I was the best birthday present she ever got,” Seibel said.

Ofelia agreed wholeheartedly with that statement.

Not only has Ofelia been integrated into Seibel’s life, but her entire family’s life, as well. Seibel commented that she and husband Stan have three children, and Ofelia replied, “Make that four.”

Seibel’s husband is also Matched in the BBBS program. Both their Littles have become a big part of their family. Ofelia even helps take care of their youngest child from time to time.

“If you ask us, we’ll say we have five kids,” Seibel explained.

Love is shared all around between Ofelia and the Seibel family. “We love each other. The kids love each other, and they fight like real siblings,” Seibel stated.

Ofelia’s grandmother concurred with Seibel. “I have no worries with this Match. None at all. She loves her Kerry, and she loves Kerry’s kids, and she loves Stan,” she said.

“But the one I love most most of all is Kerry,” Ofelia chimed in. “When I live with her, I better get my own room.” Big Brothers Big Sisters is a mentoring organization whose mission is to improve children’s lives. From kids living in abusive homes to kids having academic trouble, children from all walks of life are welcomed into the program. Anyone can make a difference in a Little’s life, simply by spending 30 minutes a week with them.

## **DID YOU KNOW?**

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The following is a list of statistics that demonstrate how much this program affects children by giving them a mentor to look up to:

90% said their mentors made them feel better about themselves

86% reported their mentors helped them make better choices throughout their lives

84% said their mentors taught them the importance of helping others

77% reported doing better in school because of their mentors

76% said they learned right from wrong from their mentors

52% agreed that their mentors kept them from dropping out of school

89% reported improved grades

81% reported increase in self confidence

71% reported improved student attitude

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