

Bridging Lives

-Paige Kelloway

I was first introduced to the Bridging Lives program by my neighbors at the beginning of freshman year. Their daughter had been involved for all four years of high school and was constantly raving about it. I asked them for an application because I had always wanted to be a part of a “Big Brother, Big Sister” style program. A few weeks later, I was paired with Macayla, a third grade girl living in a single-parent household in Marblehead, and we have been meeting every week ever since.

In 2000, Marblehead residents Dr. Jack Weltner, a family and child psychiatrist, and Judith Black, a nationally renowned storyteller, created a mentoring program for Marblehead youngsters, called Bridging Lives. They have also found support from Judy Luise, a guidance counselor at the high school, and Paul Crosby, director of the Marblehead Counseling Center. Elementary students from kindergarten to fifth grade throughout the town are matched with teenage volunteers, mostly from Marblehead High School, who are then committed to two hours a week with their little partner. Since its beginning, over 100 students have participated in Bridging Lives as either a big or little partner.

There is no set schedule or requirements that the pair must follow when they're together; they create their own unique agenda. It may include baking a cake, playing basketball, or reading a story aloud. Together, my partner Macayla and I have developed a comfortable routine: start with having a snack, then finish her homework, create a recipe from scratch, and finally, play a card or board game. Whatever the activities the pair decides to do, the goal is the same for all: to “add a little extra TLC” to the lives of their partners, as co-founder Judith Black likes to say. The

ultimate purpose is to provide the children with the one-on-one attention so necessary for growth, reassurance, and empowerment.

In addition to the weekly meetings with their partners, members of the program are encouraged to attend biweekly teen support group meetings, led by Judith Black. There are also four special annual events throughout the year, the fall picnic, Hanukah party, winter game day, and “No Talent Show.” These meetings and events provide opportunities for the teens to discuss any conflicts they may be having, learn how to strengthen their relationships or solve problems, and, of course, eat some of Judith’s famous cookies. But more importantly, Judith reminds the teens that it’s mainly about simply showing up for their partner. It doesn’t necessarily matter *what* they do because it’s the consistent commitment and connection that truly makes a difference.

Even though Bridging Lives is designed for high school students to be mentors, my partner Macayla has often been the one in this role. I think of her as a little sister who has taught me about self-confidence, taking risks, and embracing opportunity. Bridging Lives states that it fosters “Partnerships for Growth,” and my relationship with Macayla is certainly a testament to that. I am so fortunate to have joined this program freshman year, and I urge all high schoolers reading this to do the same.