Big Brothers Big Sisters pair bond over shared love of food

Jennifer McClellan Arizona Republic | USA TODAY NETWORK

It’s been six years since Melissa Wilbur and Cheyanne Harvey were matched through Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Arizona.

When they look back at that first meeting, they remember jittery nerves. Both had been matched before without success. Each hoped it would stick this time.

Wilbur, who was 36 at the time, came to the gathering dressed up from work. A tall woman to start, her heels made her tower over the almost 10-year-old. The shy girl sat silent while Wilbur chatted about her favorite things — mostly food and activities revolving around it. Then Cheyanne passed a note to her mom: She liked Wilbur because they shared an

Big Sisters of Central Arizona

To become a mentor or enroll a child, call 602-264-9254 or visit bbbsaz.org. You may also make donations online.

The agency currently has a large number of mentors in the East Valley and Scottsdale who are waiting to be matched. If you know of a child who would benefit from being part of the program, you can sign them up at bbbsaz.org.

See PAIR, Page 2D
Pair

Continued from Page 1D

affinity for cupcakes.

“Food was our first connection,” Wilbur said.

This holiday season, the two will continue to cook together, making festive dishes like Cheyanne’s favorite saltine toffee (see recipe). By doing so, they hope to bring attention to the magic of the Big Brothers Big Sisters program.

The goal of the non-profit agency is to pair kids ages 6-18 with a positive role model. “Bigs,” as they’re called in the program, mentor their “Littles,” instilling them with good habits, morals and life skills.

Last year, the Central Arizona chapter served more than 1,500 young people, many of whom are faced with hurdles. More than 60 percent live in households with family income below $30,000. Like Cheyanne, 76 percent live in single-adult homes.

Finding common ground between an adult and a child can be difficult in any situation. For a Big-Little relationship, it’s essential.

One of the first things that brought Wilbur and Cheyanne closer was a cupcake-decorating class.

“It took a while to talk, but once we started, it seems like we didn’t stop,” Wilbur wrote in a scrapbook entry from the cupcake class.

Wilbur has made scrapbooks for every year she and Cheyanne have been together. The books chronicle outings to the Taco Festival, the Bacon Festival and getting strawberry frozen yogurt at a Diamondbacks game.

Flipping through the pages, the photos show the power role models have on children.

In the first book, labeled 2011, Cheyanne always covers her smile with her hand. A couple of books in, she’s all confidence and white teeth. There’s a whole entry about the first time Cheyanne, now 16, ate steamed broccoli. To everyone’s surprise, the girl who hated vegetables actually liked it.

“Now, I crave broccoli…it’s so weird,” said Cheyanne, who lives with her dad.

Wilbur said the teen’s studies have improved. Cheyanne wants to be a registered nurse and is taking courses like human anatomy and pathology at the East Valley Institute of Technology toward that goal.

Wilbur has drilled it into Cheyanne that avoiding alcohol and drugs — and people who use them — will help her achieve success in her career and life.

Youth who were enrolled in the program for 18 months were 46 percent less likely to start using drugs than those who were not paired with a mentor, according to research from the national Big Brothers Big Sisters organization. They were also less likely to skip school or be violent.

For her part, Wilbur said Cheyanne has helped her be more patient and understanding.

Support through Season for Sharing

Season for Sharing and Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Arizona are long-standing Season for Sharing partners. In 2016, the agency received a $15,000 grant to support its STARS Mentoring Children of Prisoners program, which gives vulnerable youth with incarcerated parents the opportunity to develop mentor relationships.

Season for Sharing raised $2.4 million in 2016 and gave 100 percent of it to agencies that support children and families, aid older adults, boost education and help domestic violence victims.

How to donate:

- Fill out the online form at sharing.azcentral.com.
- Use the coupon on 4A of The Arizona Republic and mail donations to P.O. Box 29250, Phoenix, AZ 85038-9250.
- Text “sharing” to 51-555 and click on the link in the text message.

“We’re kind of learning together,” Wilbur said, in the kitchen and in life.

The two have continued to make memories through food. Today, they share three of their favorites:

- Low-carb cheeseburger bites
- Healthy sweet potato pancakes
- Saltine toffee cookies

Reach the reporter at 602-444-8546 or jennifer.mclellan@arizona-republic.com.
Low-Carb
Cheeseburger Bites

Servings: 8.

1 pound lean ground beef (or turkey or chicken)
¼ cup almond flour
1 large egg
2 tablespoons ketchup
2 teaspoons mustard
½ cup reduced-fat shredded cheese, divided use
¼ cup white onion, chopped
2 tablespoons bacon bits

Cheeseburger toppings of your choice

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. In a large bowl, mix the ground meat, flour, egg, ketchup, mustard and half the cheese. Evenly distribute the mixture in a muffin pan. Top each with bacon bits. Bake for 13 minutes.

Remove pan and top the bites with the remaining cheese. Bake for another 12 minutes. Remove from oven and top the bites with ketchup, relish or other toppings of your choice.

From The Protein Chef
Healthy Sweet Potato Pancakes

Servings: 2-3.

½ cooked sweet potato
4 tablespoons coconut flour
2 teaspoons vanilla extract
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
2 large eggs
¾ cup unsweetened vanilla almond milk (or regular milk)
1 scoop baking protein or your choice of protein powder
1 tablespoon sugar substitute of your choice

1 teaspoon baking powder
¾ teaspoon salt
Sugar-free syrup

Add all ingredients except the syrup into a large bowl and mix everything together (a hand mixer will make things easier if you’re leaving the sweet potato skin on). Coat your pan or griddle with non-stick cooking spray.

Drop batter mixture onto the prepared griddle by heaping tablespoonfuls and cook until golden brown. Cook each side for 2-3 minutes and repeat until your mix is gone. Top pancakes with some sugar-free syrup.

From The Protein Chef
Saltine Toffee Cookies

Servings: 35 cookies.

4 ounces saltine crackers
1 cup dark brown sugar
1 cup butter
2 cups semisweet chocolate chips
¼ cup chopped pecans

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Line cookie sheet with saltine crackers in single layer. In a saucepan, combine the sugar and butter. Bring to a boil and boil for 3 minutes, stirring almost constantly. Immediately pour over saltines and spread to cover crackers completely. Bake for 5-6 minutes.

Remove from oven and sprinkle chocolate chips over the top. Let sit for 5 minutes. Spread melted chocolate and top with chopped nuts. Cool completely and break into pieces to serve.

From Allrecipes.com