WE’RE FAMILY: How my sister changed my life

By RACHEL COLEMAN
Photos by MICHAEL BLOOM
“She’s more than just a Big Sister. She’s a part of our family,” said Sandra Camacho, of Maybrook.

Six years ago, Sandra and her daughter, Rachel, adopted a 58-year-old woman named Lisa Calapa into their family.

Lisa was matched to Rachel as her Big Sister through the Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County, a long-term, professionally-supported mentoring program with a local office in Vails Gate.

At the time, the Camacho family lived in Newburgh. Rachel was in fourth or fifth grade when Sandra first heard about the program. Worried that her daughter might get into trouble with her friends, she was considering signing up. Sandra wanted Rachel to have someone that would give her good advice.

“It was kind of a hard time, because she was a preteen,” said Sandra, adding that as her oldest child, Rachel, at age 10, had a lot on her shoulders. “I wanted someone that she could trust, someone to tell the things she’s afraid to tell me. She could tell her Big Sister.”

Meanwhile, Lisa Calapa had recently retired from a career in teaching and was living nearby in New Windsor.

“I had retired and I was looking for things to do—something that would make a difference,” said Lisa. “It was something I thought about for many years and the time was right.”

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County matches a child and mentor based upon their interests and hobbies, personalities, geographic location and the child’s needs. The children in their program come from various types of home environments, family structures, socioeconomic levels, ethnic backgrounds and neighborhoods across Orange County.

“Their backgrounds, personalities, needs and goals are unique. What they all have in common is that they can benefit from additional caring adult support, friendship, guidance and encouragement. We are dealing with youth who have often encountered frequent disappointment in their lives,” the agency explains to potential mentors, going on to add that the volunteer helps build hope and renew faith that “adults care” and that “good supportive relationships matter.”

Once the application has been accepted and the agency has made a tentative match, there is an introductory meeting to let the mentor and parent get to know each other before moving forward. Sandra was encouraged when she heard that Lisa was a retired teacher, didn’t smoke or drink, had a daughter, and spoke fluent Spanish.

“There was a lot about her that I really liked,” said Sandra. “I thought she would be a good advisor for Rachel.”

The next step was to introduce the pair. Rachel’s memory of their first meeting is a bit hazy, as she was just ten years old at the time.

“I just remember my mom said, ‘You’re going to meet this woman. This is what she likes, this is what you like—you guys will get along.’ I was a little about it, but then I met Lisa and I was like, OMG, we really do get along!” said Rachel.

As they seemed to hit it off right from the start, Sandra approved the match. Lisa admits they received funny looks over the years when she was introduced as Rachel’s big sister, but the age difference hasn’t kept them from enjoying themselves. The pair has spent time together at movies, bookstores, picnics and street fairs, going apple and pumpkin picking, baking and making gingerbread houses for Christmas each year.

Rachel recalled one somewhat overwhelming outing—a venture into the world of bowling.

“I’m a really bad bowler,” Rachel said flatly.

Lisa laughed, explaining that it wasn’t her idea to go bowling and Rachel had been very unenthusiastic.

“You just walked up to the line and dropped the ball?” Lisa said, as the pair laughed at the memory.

Rachel’s favorite memory, however, is their trip to the Forest of Fear last year.

“Rachel had knives thrown at her!” Lisa exclaimed.

“That was fun,” Rachel said, grinning.

In a general sense, a mentor “shares their world” with the child through simple interactions such as attending a community event, playing a board game or shooting hoops, taking leaves, taking a bike ride, bowling or building something. The agency stresses that it is “not about the activity, but the conversations and the opportunities that a mentor can open the child to as they build their mentoring relationship.”

“Rachel tells her things, topics she’s scared to talk to me about,” said Sandra, adding that Lisa “always gives good advice.”

“She’s given me a lot of advice about boys and school,” said Rachel, who is now sixteen and a junior at Valley Central High School, adding that Lisa encouraged her to get involved in school activities. “I used to be a big procrastinator and now I’m procrastinating less. She’s helped me with that.”

“I’ve enjoyed seeing her grow up,” said Lisa. “We’ve maintained a relationship. I’ve gotten to know her and gotten to know her family, a very nice family. Her mother is great. I was able to be there when Rachel was confirmed and at her quinceañera.”

Lisa taught Spanish for 35 years before retiring from the Monroe-Woodbury School District. Lisa said she has an affinity for the Spanish language and Hispanic culture and she was excited to get to know Rachel’s family.

“My life has been enriched in that I’ve been able to experience a wonderful Hispanic family,” said Lisa.

Lisa attended Marist College in Poughkeepsie. As a freshman she had to declare a major. It occurred to her that she had taken Spanish since seventh grade and enjoyed the language (and really didn’t like math or science), so she put down Spanish as her major.

“I absolutely loved the program, the department, everything about it.” She fell deeper in love with the language and the culture and was able to spend a year in Spain. “It was the right fit for me.”

When her advisor asked her what she planned to do with her degree, Lisa said, “I’d like to walk around the world and speak Spanish.”

“He said, ‘That’s fine, but how are you going to make money?’” Lisa laughed, going on to explain that she ultimately decided she
wanted to teach and share her love of the language. She started teaching in Port Jervis and taught there for seven years before moving to the Monroe-Woodbury School District.

A year or so ago, Rachel’s family moved to Maybrook. Rachel is currently in the Orange-Ulster BOCES Career & Technical Education program for Principles of Health Occupations, with plans to become a registered nurse. She has learned of an opportunity to work as a travel nurse, assisting people in other countries for six months or more.

“I like helping people and I get to travel too, so it seems like the ideal job!” said Rachel.

According to BBBS, young people in mentoring programs are 55 percent more likely to be enrolled in college, 81 percent more likely to report participating regularly in sports or extracurricular activities, 78 percent more likely to volunteer regularly in their communities and more than twice as likely to say they held a leadership position in a club or sports team. Mentoring programs “play a powerful role in providing young people with the tools to make responsible choices, attend and engage in school, and reduce or avoid risky behavior like drug use.”

“Every day in our county, caring adults volunteer their time as mentors through Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County to create consistent and supportive relationships to young people,” said Executive Director Sharon Williams. “At its most basic level, mentoring is successful in real life because it guarantees a young person has an adult to turn to and that they have a guiding hand to help them in dealing with day-to-day challenges. At a more complex level, there is a powerful mentoring effect that ultimately makes our communities like Maybrook stronger.”

Big Brothers Big Sisters has operated for more than 100 years, with 350 agencies currently operating in all 50 states and in 35 countries around the world. The Orange County chapter was started in 1977 in response to a need for mentors of children from single parent homes. The number was “skyrocketing” due to a rise in divorce.

“We’re like a big family,” Sandra said, explaining that the local office is always there for them. “They always care for us, are looking out, and checking on how we’re doing.

It’s like a big family and they’re always watching over you. They have a lot of activities and do a lot for the community.”

Currently, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County has 93 active matches. There are 24 children—fully enrolled and ready to be matched—waiting in the wings for their Big Brother or Big Sister.

“There are an additional 35 children in enrollment, who are going through the process of getting ready to be matched, and 26 more in the inquiry phase, just starting out,” said Julie Woodward, the program director for Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County. “Enrollment is ongoing, year round.”

Woodward explained that while they currently have 26 volunteers ready to be matched, they do not pair with the children ready to be matched, due to program, location or preferences. They are always looking for volunteers and Lisa said she would “absolutely” recommend volunteering for the program.

“It’s expanded my life,” said Lisa. “I’m able to get to know someone else’s amazing family.”

Prior to being matched, volunteers are provided with training covering topics such as trust and communication and how to address value differences and common situations. Otherwise, mentors draw on their life experiences, interests and talents. A volunteer needs to be at least 18 years old, have a valid driver’s license, reliable transportation and the ability to meet the minimum one-year commitment to mentor.

“We need more men to get involved,” said Lisa. “For a boy, having a male role model, especially if he’s from a family where there isn’t one...it’s really important.”

Volunteers for the organization are predominantly female, leaving a shortage of male mentors. Currently, 67 percent of their matched volunteers are female and 73 percent of those waiting to be matched are female. Last year, only 35 percent of their mentors were male.

Lisa added that being a mentor does not take a lot of time. In the beginning, it is recommended that the matched pair meet just twice a month.

“For the first couple years we adhered to that pretty well. As she got older, friends and school became more important and took more time, and we’ve adjusted,” said Lisa. “I don’t see her as often, but we stay in touch.”

If someone is interested in volunteering, but the time commitment is an issue, there are other ways to help support the organization.

“Folks can donate their time as a board or committee member, assist with the logistics at fundraising events, form a team for Bowl for Kids’ Sake, form a foursome for our annual Fore the Kids Golf Classic held in August at West Point, become a sponsor for one of our fundraising events, or hold a clothing drive at their place of work, worship, or school,” said Woodward.

Recently, Lisa has been helping Rachel with job ideas and provided her with a letter of recommendation for an application. She noted that the emphasis is not that a match sees each other, but that the children are provided the support that they need and know the mentor is just a call, text, email or social media message away.

“There is another person in your life that you can go to,” said Lisa.

The pair says they fully intend to keep in contact after Rachel graduates from high school. In the meantime, Rachel said if there are parents considering the Big Brothers Big Sisters program, they should go for it.

“It’s really good,” said Rachel. “Besides your family you have somebody to talk to and they guide you. She’s guided me. They should do it!”

Today, Lisa also volunteers for Habitat for Humanity, babysits, tutors, takes yoga classes and generally keeps busy. When asked if she would become a Big Sister again, Lisa responded, “Absolutely! Well, as long as they don’t mind a grandma...or a really, really big sister!”

“I didn’t think it would last as long as it has,” Sandra admitted being pleasantly surprised and said she just can’t thank their Big Sister enough—Lisa Calapa has truly become a part of their family.

“I’m blessed to have her in my family and in my life,” said Sandra.
UPCOMING EVENTS
December 9: Annual Holiday Ha-Ha’s Comedy Night  // More information on pg. 29

For more information on Big Brothers Big Sisters, visit their website: www.bbbs.org, or the local chapter’s Facebook page under Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County is located at: 871 Blooming Grove Turnpike, P.O. Box 426, Vails Gate, NY 12584.