

Samantha Hawke
BBBS Reflection Paper
Leadership Certificate Program
VanderVeen

Compassion, Acceptance, and Love – Serving as a Big Sister

Mentoring Marisol as her Big Sister has been enlightening, difficult, joyful, fulfilling, and full of reflection.

Expectations. In joining the Big Brothers Big Sisters program, I expected to spend an hour a week with a younger girl making friendship bracelets and baking brownies. Over the past months, those are things that we have done, along with swimming at the Holland Aquatic Center, horseback riding, touring Hope College, dinners at Grand King Buffett (her favorite restaurant), and hours of painting pictures and watching Spongebob Squarepants. More importantly than the things we do though, is the time spent, – listening, caring, just being there - something I understood minimally before becoming a Big Sister.

Gregory Boyle articulates the importance of providing complete compassion, acceptance, and love well in his memoir *Tattoos on the Heart*. Boyle, a Jesuit Roman Catholic priest, has dedicated his life to ministering to gangs in the Los Angeles area. He created Homeboy Industries, an organization that provides employments and other resources to gang members, allowing them to gain work experience and helping them to understand their potential in the world. Boyle's philosophy in his ministry and way of life is to love all as God loves. In reading his memoir, the theme that ingrained itself in my mind was the idea of complete acceptance – we are all wholly accepted by God, and therefore, we

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should express that acceptance and love to each other, especially to those who have never known what it feels like to be unconditionally loved and accepted.

Activities. _____ is the second youngest in a family of four children – with older sister and two brothers. Her parents both work full-time jobs on different shifts, as does her Grandma who lives with them. For seven people, and the occasional cousin or friend who stays with them for a few weeks, they have three bedrooms and one shower. _____ shares a bed with her Grandma, and has never really had her own space to spend time in. Her neighborhood is a few blocks away from Hope’s campus, but very much like traveling to a different part of town. The park across the street is not safe after dark, and [her family] keeps a pit-bull as their full time watchdog.

Lessons. I saw these parts of _____’s everyday life, and was overwhelmed by the dichotomy between her childhood and my own. At first, I did not believe I had any ability to make a difference in this girl’s life. Our meet-ups in the beginning felt awkward, as I strived to do and say the “right” things; I was nervous about coming across as weird, or bossy, or however a nine-year-old girl might see a new mentor. Fortunately, that initial worry and potential for awkwardness faded away fairly quickly, and _____ and I began to spend a good amount of time together, hanging out after school and going to different mentoring collaborative programs through Big Brothers Big Sisters.

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While we got along well and did many fun things, I didn't really understand the impact I could have on _____'s life until I asked about a broken window at her house one day. She told me her dad had been drinking, gotten angry, and smashed the window. Many different thoughts hit me in that moment – the importance of positive role models, what her family life might be like behind closed doors, should I contact someone from the BBBS office? I realized that my presence in _____'s life, as a consistent source of acceptance and love for her, was very possibly serving a real purpose for her. Gregory Boyle realized the importance of feeling accepted and loved, and saw a desperate need to communicate these unconditional feelings from God to Los Angeles gang members. The founders of Big Brothers Big Sisters also realized the need for a positive role model relationship between older mentors and younger mentees to foster a sense of acceptance and love in those who may not receive it at home.

Tattoos on the Heart helped me to better articulate the thoughts and feelings developed through my mentoring experience. I had been _____'s Big for a while before reading it, and was amazed at the similarities between what I had been feeling, and unable to adequately express, and the ideas and convictions of Father Boyle. It has inspired me to work harder in connecting with people, especially those who do not have a strong support system or stable family life.

Last month, _____'s family moved out of state. I think about her often, and hope that her parents have connected her with another mentoring program so that she can continue

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to receive positive encouragement and have someone to spend time with that she knows is there just to do things with her. Gregory Boyle ministers to gang members, most of whom are in their late teens and older. His work has changed countless lives and helped many to understand their intrinsic self-worth. Imagine beginning this type of mentoring/ministry earlier, with younger kids, much like the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. If Father Boyle is able to make such an impact on adults, what are the possibilities for change by engaging younger kids? Big Brothers Big Sisters explores this potential, and impacts many young lives everyday.

I hope that my impact on Marisol was as positive and life altering as hers was on me. Serving as her mentor through BBBS changed my view of the world, and has encouraged me to continue to work to make a difference in the lives of those who need it. Father Boyle encourages me in the same way, making it known that one person can change the lives of many, and it is never too late to start. I am so blessed in my life, and hope I can use what I've learned as a mentor and from Father Boyle's experiences continuing on in my life's journey.