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COOKING, BAKING A BONDING EXPERIENCE FOR BIG BROTHERS BIG SISTERS

Uniontown, PA - What do you do when you can't find what you need? Well, sometimes, you make it yourself.

That's the life lesson Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Laurel Region member Ashley Howes wanted to teach her "little sister," while allowing the teen to have some fun and spend time with other "littles."

"I'm new to the organization, and my little sister is 18," Howes said.

Howes met her little sister when the girl was 17, and she noted that most of the "littles" are 10 or younger. That means there aren't always a lot of group activities geared toward older members and their "bigs." So, Howes decided to start one.

With the help of Fayette County Coordinator Brittany Cooley, Howes began holding cooking and baking sessions in her home, with the most recent being focused on Christmas cookies.

"I wanted (my little sister) to know she's not alone," Howes said. "And it's a teaching lesson – if you don't see something for yourself, make it happen."

Howes began by inviting pairs of "bigs" and "littles" to her home in September for the first session, a pizza-making class, which she taught with assistance from her little sister. It was well-attended, with "eight or nine groups of people of different genders, different ages," Howes said.

For that first class, she said, she began by asking whether anyone had ever made homemade dough and informing participants that the first step is to throw flour at your partner. The moment served as an icebreaker, she said, for people who may have been nervous at undertaking a new activity in someone else's home. The tactic worked, as Cooley said Howes put everyone at ease, and everyone involved had a great time.

"Ashley is very welcoming," Cooley said. "The first one we did, she kind of made everyone feel at home."

The pizza-making class was such a success that Cooley and Howes decided to make it a regular activity. The second class, a Christmas cookie-baking class, was held Dec. 3. Bigs and littles baked sugar cookies, enjoyed some holiday cheer and were able to take home their own cookie-making kits. There are plans to continue baking into the new year with pasta and cake as possible follow-ups.

Cooley said the program is "something different" for kids in Fayette County. A big sister herself, Cooley attended the cookie bake with her little sister, who "loved it," she said.

“I enjoy it, and I think the kids enjoy it,” Cooley said. “It really took off, I think, because it’s big sisters and little sisters planning and instructing.”

Howes said planning the events is a bonding experience for her and her little sister, who create the recipes and shop for ingredients together.

“It kind of puts her more into a leadership role,” Howes said. “And cooking and baking, that’s for everyone.”

Howes said along with the flour fights that are swiftly becoming a tradition, bakers get to take a little break in the middle of the sessions and play games or run around her house and property, even playing with some of her chickens.

“They just run the whole house, the whole yard,” she said. “That’s what it’s about – giving them a day to just do whatever they want.”

While the baking activities are proving to be a ton of fun, Howes also helped create them to “lessen the barrier of potential “bigs” not volunteering because they’re unsure what they would do with their “littles,” she said. “We always need volunteers.”

Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Laurel Region currently has numerous children waiting for mentors. For information on how to become a big brother or sister, visit <https://bbbslr.org>.

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.fayettecountypa.org.

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