

NEWS

Orange County's Big Sister of the Year wins local, state honors for inspiring life changes in mentee

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"We've become a family," says Big Sister Laura Stahlberg, right, with her Little Sister, America Carrasco.

DREW A. KELLEY, CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

By
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SAN JUAN CAPISTRANO – At 11, America Carrasco had always wanted to go ice skating, but never had the opportunity.

Her new Big Sister, Laura Stahlberg, wanted to break the ice after they were paired in 2010, so she took America to the Aliso Viejo Ice Palace.

In six years of outings, movies and baking sessions with Stahlberg, this is America's favorite memory because it was when Big Sister and Little Sister got to know one another.

"I had wanted to go ice skating for a long time," said America, now 17. "It was such a fun day."

"It was the first of many great memories," Stahlberg said.

Today, the Big Sister/Little Sister designation is more of a formality for Stahlberg and America, who consider each other family. But that doesn't mean the Big Brothers Big Sisters organization has forgotten about their formal ties.

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Stahlberg was recently named Big Sister of the Year for Orange County and for the state. She was selected at the local level from among other Big Sisters whose Little Sisters are graduating from the program. She will find out in June how she fares in the national Big Sister of the Year competition.

Getting involved

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County is set to host a networking mixer 6-8 p.m. April 26 at the 4th Street Market, 201 East 4th Street in Santa Ana. Those interested can meet other Bigs to learn about the program. To RSVP for the event, send an email to jade@hkamarcom.com.

At 11, America had already been a Little Sister once before and was looking for a new mentor to help with homework. Because her mother works long hours as a housekeeper, America was often home alone watching TV after school.

Stahlberg had always enjoyed volunteering as a trail guide, but was looking to do something more personal with her service.

“I was nervous before we met,” Stahlberg said. “We were only required to see each other once a month, but we started off seeing each other every week, and I

think that really helped establish our relationship.”

“Right from the start, Laura’s always been really nice and supportive of me,” said America, of San Juan Capistrano.

As part of her application for the statewide competition, Stahlberg wrote an essay to encapsulate her experience with America. To do so, she consulted her journal, which she’s used to chronicle everything the two have done in the past six years.

Stahlberg has taken America to all of the Southern California theme parks; to French and Thai restaurants and everything in between; and to camp and stargaze in the wilderness. But she said their favorite times are spent hanging out at home.

Stahlberg and her wife, Treva, had spent 24 years living in Laguna Beach and most recently spent two years living in Laguna Niguel. The two moved two weeks ago to Capistrano Beach, but no matter where they’ve lived, Stahlberg continues to have America over to cook and bake.

One time, Stahlberg bought America a chef’s coat and served Treva dinner as if their home was a restaurant. America went out with a notepad to take Treva’s order, then she and Stahlberg cooked up the meal for all three of them.

“It’s hard to single out a favorite memory when we have so many great memories from all the time we’ve spent together,” Stahlberg said.

America is simultaneously a Little Sister and a Big Sister because she’s participating in the Big Brothers Big Sisters program at San Juan Hills High School. Once a week, she mentors a third grade boy from San Juan Elementary School.

“I benefited from the same program when I was his age,” America said. “I wanted to give back, and he’s so cute and smart.”

Melissa Beck, CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County and the Inland Empire, said America’s dedication to academics and community service were important factors in Stahlberg being selected as Big Sister of the Year at both the local and state levels.

“The stability and consistency of their relationship are key factors in creating lasting change for children facing adversity,” Beck said. “This is exactly what we strive for with all of our one-to-one matches.”

When America turns 18 in November, she will graduate from the Big Sisters program and will become eligible to take on a Little Sister of her own, which she would like to do.

Stahlberg said she would consider taking on another Little Sister once America graduates, but she doesn’t plan to stop seeing America as often as she can.

“We’ve become a family,” Stahlberg said, “so when I spend time with America, I’m reminded of what’s important and what matters.”

America is also set to graduate from San Juan Hills High School. She said she would like to become a nurse and open free clinics in developing countries.

That goal comes as no surprise to Stahlberg. In looking back over their time together, Stahlberg said America is fundamentally the same person she’s always been – self-reliant, determined, resilient and caring of others.

“When we first met, she had three wishes: she wanted to go to a WWE wrestling match, she wanted a dog and she wanted to help children in Africa,” Stahlberg said.

“We went to a WWE event in Los Angeles not long after we met, and her home still can’t really handle a dog, but she’s well on her way to accomplishing that third goal.”