

Meet Your Match, Find Your Connection

By Beverley O'Neil, Ktunaxa Nation

Providing guidance, friendship, and support to young women as they travel the journey from childhood to adulthood is not a new concept for Aboriginal women. This kind of mentoring has long been a part of the culture and history of Aboriginal people, especially that of Aboriginal women. And in Vancouver, "a Canada first" is underway with the First Nations Big Sister Mentoring Program of the Big Sisters of BC Lower Mainland.

The idea of recreating this historic practice was introduced to Big Sisters of BC Lower Mainland in response to the fact that a very high proportion of children in the Big Sisters program and on the waiting list (about 16 percent) are of Aboriginal ancestry. The Big Sisters organization was having limited success in connecting these girls with mentors who share their history and culture. Big Sisters supporter **Lisa Ethans** decided to take on this challenge and thus the First Nations Big Sister program was started in 1998 by a group of Aboriginal women, the Big Sisters of BC Lower Mainland, and other women leaders of the Vancouver area.

Wendy John, a member of the First Nations Big Sister Mentoring Program Committee and former Chief of the Musqueam Indian Band and Vice-Chief of the Assembly of First Nations BC, is a part of that committee. She realized "It was no good to sit in an office and talk about helping young women. I felt I needed to do something." Wendy was raised in a community where helping others was very much a part of her culture. At the Musqueam First Nation in Vancouver Aunties played a very important role in raising the young women in the community. It was the Auntie's responsibility to pass on the teachings of her culture. Yet, it became apparent that many young women desired this connection. "I think that this is one of the major areas we lost from residential schools", commented Wendy.

The First Nations Big Sister Mentoring program differs from other Big Sister programs

by incorporating cross-cultural training for Big Sisters, agency staff, and volunteers. Aboriginal women can become involved in three ways:

- ❑ As a big Sister, which involves an ongoing weekly commitment to spend time with a Little Sister;
- ❑ As an Aboriginal Auntie, which means participating in Saturday afternoon group activities scheduled every six to eight weeks for girls on the waiting list; or,
- ❑ As a volunteer, helping to organize events or teach special crafts and skills.

Since the First Nations Program launch, about 50 Aboriginal women have attended information and training sessions to explore becoming a Big Sister. Ten women have signed on as Aboriginal Aunties and six women have made the full commitment to become a Big Sister.

Treana Bodnar, a 30-year old woman from the **Samahquam First Nation** and a legal secretary, is now a Big Sister. She first became aware of the Big Sister program roughly seven years ago when she lived in Edmonton, and then attended her first training session a few years ago. She wanted to be certain she was able to fulfill the commitment to her little sister of 3 to 5 hours per week for at least one year before she applied for a match. So, one-and-a-half years ago, Treana felt she was ready, and that was when she met her match in her Little Sister Heather who is now 13 years old. Treana and **Heather** are both giving people. Once a week Heather and her brothers and father volunteer to serve dinners at Collingwood House. When Heather and Treana get together, Treana puts into practice her cooking skills baking up a storm. Other times they might go for a walk, draw, paint, read, or try things they haven't done before, but mostly they talk. The complex that Heather lives in with her brothers and single father doesn't have very many girls living there.

So, the connection she makes with Treena once a week is important for that all important 'girl' talk.

Treena and Heather are building connections, forming a bond. They both wanted to play tennis, despite the fact that neither ever played before. "It was quite the game." Commented Treena. "We didn't do very well, but we laughed a lot. We made a pact to keep playing till we both become pros!"

Becoming an actual Big Sister requires a major commitment - a commitment of time, energy, and heart. A First Nation Big Sister is:

- ❑ At least 20 years old;
- ❑ Of North American Aboriginal origin;
- ❑ Mature, stable, reliable, respectful of other and accepting of her Little Sister;
- ❑ Interested in developing a friendship with a young woman;
- ❑ Able to commit to 3 to 5 hours per week for a minimum of one year; and,
- ❑ Comfortable with the Big Sister philosophy.

It might seem like a big step, but it is likely the step that will make the world of difference to the Little Sister. **Thelma Baker** was 7 years old when she became matched with her Big Sister **Jenny Vickery**. The two of them grew together, and learned together, and it wasn't long before Jenny became part of Jenny's family. Thelma is now a young woman. Her match with Jenny has graduated - the match has ended. Jenny became one of her best friends and ultimately, one of the women in her life she found she could count on. The two remain close and best of friends today.

Big Sisters isn't just about the Big and Little Sister connection, it is also about the family. Little Sister's families are multi-faceted - they are big and small, have single and double parent households, have sisters and brothers, or are sole children. It is this family that supports the relationship between the Big and Little Sister to occur, first by recognizing the benefits of this relationship, then second by registering the young woman with the Big Sisters Program, and enabling the weekly relationships... very much like Heather's father and brothers.

To prepare for a relationship with a Little Sister, the aspiring Big Sister is required to attend training sessions and a screening interview, obtain a criminal record check, and supply the names of two references along with her application. **Tina Sembler**, a young thirty-something entrepreneur (owner of **Every Last Detail** based in Tsawwassen) from the **Nakazdli First Nation**, has just completed her paperwork and is awaiting the final interview before the match. On average the paperwork takes two months to complete, and then the process of identifying a match begins. Tina knows that she is now ready for the one-year commitment with her soon-to-be Little Sister, and is eagerly waiting the day when she will 'meet her match'. "I look forward to sharing experiences with my Little Sister, and hope that I will be a role model and an inspiration to her, the way my Little Sister will be for me."

Once approved, a Big Sister can expect to:

- ❑ Develop a supportive friendship with her Little Sister by spending three to five hours per week together in activities they both enjoy. And, if for some reason this is not possible, she is responsible for discussing it with her counselor, Little Sister, and their family.
- ❑ Model an attitude of acceptance and respect for her and for others when she is with her Little Sister.
- ❑ Strive for a democratic approach in the relationship and, when appropriate, make use of the communications skills and self-awareness taught in the training.
- ❑ Ensure the majority of time spent with her Little Sister is one-to-one.
- ❑ Be responsible for her Little Sister during their time together.
- ❑ Maintain regular contact with her counselor at the office and notify them of any changes in her or her Little Sister's life, or if for some reason she hasn't been able to reach her Little Sister.
- ❑ Be aware of and adhere to Big Sister policies.

Like Treena and Heather, when the Big and Little Sisters get together, they may paint or draw, talk, attend Big Sister events, go for a walk, or even skip rope. All matches are also eligible to participate in a regular program of free activities. Although there are many rewards to Big Sisterhood, it may also be difficult... that is, difficult to say good-bye to her Little Sister if and when the time comes.

For those Aboriginal women who want to give back to their community but feel they are unable to make the full-time commitment, the First Nations Big Sister Mentoring Program created the "Be an Auntie" Program. Like the Big Sister Program, this Program enables Aboriginal women to make the connection with the Little Sisters in a 'community' role without having to make the same time commitment as a Big Sister. Aboriginal Aunties will participate in a group activities afternoon, scheduled every six to eight weeks for Aboriginal girls on the waiting list. Busy women will have the flexibility to contribute as their time permits. The first "Be an Auntie for a Day" event will include First Nation activities including story telling, crafts, and cultural dancing.

For others, there are opportunities to support the program through volunteering at or planning an event, donating supplies and event tickets, or sponsoring an event.

The second First Nations Big Sisters Partnership Feast will again celebrate the partnership that created the program, but this time the successes and contributions behind this

partnership as well as the matches will also be included. Again, Honorary/Celebrity Servers who are mostly men will serve guests at the feast. The Honorary Servers are Chiefs, Presidents and Executive Directors from Aboriginal organizations, or agencies that support the Aboriginal community. Some of these people have been Chief Ed John, Chief Allan Claxton, Miles Richardson, John Watson, Tom Molloy, Darrel Mounsey, Roy Francis, Mike Bonshor, and the RCMP Aboriginal Policing. **BC Hydro** and the **Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development** have been long-time supporters of this program and are title sponsors for the event. The **UBC First Nations House of Learning** has again donated the facility for this celebration. Others who have supported this celebration are - Alcan Smelters, Bank of Montreal, Deloitte & Touche, Davis & Company, Federal Treaty Negotiations Office, Hongkong Bank of Canada, Musqueam First Nation, Pacific Blue Cross, Ratcliffe & Company, Tsleil-Waututh (Burrard) First Nation, Tsawwassen First Nation, Vancouver Port Corporation, and Westcoast Reduction. Other contributors have been Khot-La-Cha Native Crafts, Coast Vancouver Airport Hotel, Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre, Liliget Feast House & Catering, Vancouver Trade & Convention Centre, BTY Quantity Surveyors, Roy Henry Vickers' Eagles Aerie Gallery, RCMP Aboriginal Policing, BC Ministry of Forests, and Burrard Band Youth Development Program.

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