



Melody and Gabby.



Melody and Gabby doing yoga.

# Volunteers and Community Make Regional Agency a Winner

BY CARLIENNE A. FRISCH

**W**hen Michelle Redman became the executive director of Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) of Southern Minnesota more than three years ago, she envisioned a time when the Owatonna-based organization would receive the top national BBBS award. Under her leadership, the chapter won the National Quality Award in 2015, the Gold Standard Award in 2016, and the Pinnacle Award in 2017. When it was chosen the 2017 Agency of the Year, it was the culmination of a dream for Redman, but also a wonderful surprise.



Michelle Redman, Executive Director, BBBS

“Having won the first three awards, we knew we were in a pool for Agency of the Year,” she said. “The winner is chosen by a council of peers, and we knew we were in the top three. But at the 2018 conference, when they said my name as the executive director, it was the highlight of my career. I’ve always looked ahead to when Southern Minnesota would be recognized, but I never thought it would happen.”

In 2017, BBBS of Southern Minnesota had 594 matches of Bigs and Littles – as they are called – about 61 percent girls and 39 percent boys. The organization serves four counties – Steele, Rice, Dodge and Waseca.

Redman worked in television and advertising until her children came along, and then put her extra energy into volunteerism. Ten years ago, she became a BBBS of Southern Minnesota employee, working with grant funding and events planning before she became the executive director. She explained that winning national awards is all about community support, committed staff and willing volunteers like Melody (Mel) Hylle and Val Oldenburg. Volunteers

range in age from 18 into their 80's.

For 55-year-old Val Oldenburg, who has no grandchildren, it's an opportunity to "be a grandma" to a seven-year-old girl. Oldenburg learned about BBBS from Hylle, who has an eight-year-old Little. The two Bigs and their Littles often do activities together, some of which are offered by the organization, such as playing pickle ball or mini golf, visiting a museum or horse-back riding on a track. Some Bigs and Littles attend Twins games together. Activities can be as ordinary as cooking or even going grocery shopping.

In September, Oldenburg and her Little picked apples at Oldenburg's father's home. Oldenburg said, "She climbed the tree and got all of the top apples. Then we cored some of them. Sometimes we just hang out at my house, making crafts or slime (like Silly Putty) or we just walk the dog. We've tie-dyed a shirt. Although it's recommended to meet twice a month, we do something every week. It's affected me more than I thought it would. I get a lot of joy out of it."

Hylle learned about BBBS at a Twin Cities charity event and became a Big Sister two years ago. She said, "My Little enjoys doing community events, like going to the homecoming game or gymnastics and dance shows. We also hang out at my house, baking or doing crafts.

"Val and I enjoy going to the water-park or swimming pool with our Littles," Hylle said. "Every month we are notified about BBBS-sponsored events by email, so it's really easy. You don't even have to plan, if you don't want to, but Val and I are planning wood-working projects."

Redman said, "Volunteers do not have to change their life, just take the child along, add a child to what you are already doing."

She credits her staff, as well as volunteers and the community, with achieving the top national award. She said, "Our staff is passionate about the work we do and very goal-driven. We strive to do our best for the children we serve. In the past two years, we grew the number of children served by 27 percent, a huge accomplishment. Most children are referred by a social worker or a teacher, and even by a parent."

"Our goal for 2018 is to serve 625 children, a goal we'll surpass," she said. "Even so, we have 220 children on the wait list, more boys than girls. Although we need more male volunteers, we can match couples with boys. Volunteers



Val and Harper.

have an in-depth personal interview and we do a background check, contact references and check their driving record and that they have car insurance."

"We also have school-site matches, which can be either with an adult or with a high schooler. The volunteer and the child remain in the child's school, where they can do homework or crafts, or play on the playground," she said.

**For more information, contact  
BBBS of Southern Minnesota at  
507-414-0311 or  
[www.bbbsofsouthernmn.org](http://www.bbbsofsouthernmn.org)**

## History of Big Brothers Big Sisters

BBBS began in 1904 in New York City, when it was recognized that contact with caring adults could help children who were in trouble with the law. A court clerk, Ernest Coulter, sought volunteers to work with boys (the beginning of the Big Brothers movement), and soon after, the Ladies of Charity befriended girls who came through the New York Children's Court. That group became Catholic Big Sisters. The two groups joined forces in 1977, becoming Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, now operating in all 50 states and in 12 countries around the world.

In Steele County, the BBBS program began under the auspices of the YMCA and, in 1987, became a stand-alone organization. Three other counties have since been added--Rice, Dodge and Waseca.

# Big Brothers Big Sisters. OF SOUTHERN MINNESOTA

