



Photos by Ena Sellers

Brothers: 2nd Lt. Warren Watts II of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines is a “Big Brother” to Nicholas Cozzens, 11, through the Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southeastern North Carolina. The two enjoy hanging around and just laughing together.

Making a difference in a “BIG” way

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Did you know that just “hanging out” can make a huge difference in a child’s life? 2nd Lt. Warren Watts II of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines Regiment knows that. In fact, it’s one reason he chose to become a “big brother.”

Watts recently became a big brother through the Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southeastern North Carolina. He was matched with Nicholas Cozzens, 11, and they’ve been spending quality “hang-out” time together ever since.

“We went to the Blueberry Festival in Burgaw. That was interesting. We play board games – Risk, chess. We put puzzles together, play basketball, just basic hang-out stuff,” said Watts, adding, “It’s a program where you don’t need to devote that much time to it, and you don’t have to devote that many funds. It’s just once or twice a week for 2-3 hours. You call them, you write them. It’s just a mentoring program.”

Cozzens, who will be a sixth-grader in the fall, had very a general idea of who he was looking for to be his “Big.” He said he wanted “someone who likes to do similar things [as he does] and can hang out.” Answering his own question, Cozzens said of Watts, “And, yeah, he can do both.”

It turns out that in just “hanging out,” an adult can also be mentoring a child. In fact, mentoring children is so important that Susan Taylor, editorial director of Essence magazine and Oprah Winfrey recently made a call on The Oprah Winfrey show to recruit more than one million mentors across the United States.

“Children are really free spirits. If you don’t give [boundaries] to them, they don’t have any boundaries and they’ll just go anywhere. Children need to look at somebody who is bigger, older they can look up to and want to emulate. We all need heroes; we all need role models; children do, too,” said Watts.

Cozzens’ mom, Dana Cozzens, a former Marine and current civil servant aboard Camp Lejeune, explained why she wanted a big brother for her son. “As a single mom, and because he just has one sister, he’s got a lot of female influence in his life but he doesn’t have any male influences. So I was really looking for a positive, older role model for him and someone who would enjoy some of the same interests that he has,” she said.

Cozzens said she has seen positive changes in her son since he has been spending time with Watts. “He seems a whole lot happier. He gets real excited when he talks to his Big and when they set up to make plans to do something, he always gets really excited about it,” she said, adding, “He just seems happier overall. When he comes back from doing an activity or something with Lt. Watts, he’s always been a helpful and good kid, but he’s just in a better mood and more helpful around the home with his sister. He just overall seems to be a happier kid.”

La’Tuan Danns is director of public relations for Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southeastern North Carolina. She said there are currently about 130 active “Big/Little” matches in southeastern North Carolina. Yet there are more than 100 kids on the waiting list who have not received matches. About 75 percent of the children on the waiting list are boys. Danns called the current matching process “extremely lopsided” because most of the children that currently need matches are boys and women are more likely to volunteer than men. As the program only permits same-gender matches in the main Big Brother Big Sister program, many more men are required to become mentors.

The requirements for becoming a “Big” are extremely simple. Each volunteer must be at least 18 years old, possess a valid driver’s license and be able to commit to nine to 12 months with the program. Additionally, the candidate must be able to pass a background check to work with children.

As for Marines becoming “Bigs,” Danns said, “I feel it’s extremely important because they have so much to offer.”

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southeastern North Carolina has started a new program this year in conjunction with Department of Defense domestic elementary schools.

“Operation Big” will help the children of military families, especially those who have parents deployed, by matching them with a ‘Big.’”

Unlike the community-based Big Brothers Big Sisters program, “Operation Big” mentors will be able to be matched with an opposite-gender child. Also, couples and teams of individuals are encouraged to become “Operation Big” mentors. In this way, people can become mentors with even less of a time commitment, as one person can meet with the child one week and another person can meet with the child the next.

Watts said he is happy he became a Big Brother. He said that, in addition to being a great mentoring opportunity for kids, the program also offers positive results for the adult as well. He said having a “Little” can give a “Big” focus.

“You can’t really be a good role model if you do the things you tell the person not to do. If you’re a good-spirited person, you’ll want to be as good as you want that child to be,” said Watts. “You can’t tell him, ‘You shouldn’t curse’ and then you go off and cuss somebody out. You can’t tell them that drinking is bad, and then you get drunk every weekend. A lot of times it’s good for the adult. It gives them the boundaries that adults need as well.”

For more information on how to become a Big Brother or Big Sister, call the Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southeastern North Carolina at 252-638-5888 or toll-free at 1-866-638-5888 or e-mail the office at inquiry@bbbs-senc.org. The organization’s local Web site is www.bbbs-senc.org.