

Nation's best Big Sister is from Kentfield

John Dugan



Miriam Mills (back), the National Big Sister of the Year, visits Book Passage in Corte Madera with her Little Sister, Arleth Torres Lopez. (IJ photo/Jeff Vendsel)

Miriam Mills says being a Big Sister can't be beat. She gets to be a mom, friend and sister without the tension that comes with those relationships.

"Generally, I have the best job of all," said Mills of her relationship with 14-year-old Arleth Lopez of Novato. "It's about being another mother, but with the benefits of being a friend."

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America thinks Mills is doing that job better than anyone. Mills, a Kentfield resident, was named the National Big Sister of the Year last month, topping more than 150,000 Big Sisters around the country.

"I was just shocked. I so didn't expect to get this," Mills said. "What we've been able to do as Big and Little (Sisters) is so special already. To get this award is kind of an embarrassment of riches."

Edward Kaufman, executive director of the organization's North Bay chapter, said Mills is selling herself short when she says it's all sunshine and rainbows with Lopez.

"Miriam may say she gets the best parts of all relationships, but she's also challenging Arleth and presenting opportunities that she wouldn't have otherwise," Kaufman said.

Mills has been a Big Sister to Lopez since 2000, when Lopez was six years old. Mills said she volunteered with the organization when her daughter, Michelle, was in high school.

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Lopez, 14, said it was a perfect match almost from the beginning, after an interesting start to their relationship.

"My sister went out for ice cream when she first met her Big Sister, so I thought that was what we would do, too," said Lopez, who will be a sophomore at Novato High School in the fall. "Miriam took me to get some ice cream, and I ordered a giant, triple-decker ice cream cone. Then I dropped it.

"Miriam got me another ice cream right away, which isn't something a lot of people would do. We just hit it off after that."

Lopez said she and Mills spend most of their time together at bookstores and museums. Mills also tries to get Lopez to try new foods, because Lopez said she was "closed-minded" and picky as a kid.

Mills has also connected with Arleth's older sister, Carmelita, and is trying to help her attend cosmetology school. Mills is trying to help Arleth become the first person in her family to attend college.

Mills was nominated for California Big Sister of the Year by the organization's North Bay chapter. She and Lopez each had to write an essay about their relationship, and Mills filled out a full application.

Mills won the California award when her application earned the first perfect score in state history, according to Kaufman.

"They have really created a whole family. It's really something," Kaufman said. "The way they blended Miriam and Arleth's families into one made it a very easy decision to nominate Miriam."

After winning the California title, Mills won the national award when she was selected by a panel of outside judges from foundations and organizations around the country. Mills, her husband, Robert, Arleth Lopez and Lopez's sister, Carmelita, attended the awards ceremony in St. Louis last week.

The group turned the trip into an excuse to travel the Midwest.

"We drove to Chicago and went to a lot of museums and shows," Mills said. "We're culture vultures. We made the whole trip into a big party.

"In my Big Sister role, my job is to open new worlds for Arleth, to enrich her. I'm always looking for a new way to do that."