

MONOPOLY

on the

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Nancy Lissow (left) and Barbie Lynk share a laugh during a game of monopoly at Barbie's home in Lima Sept. 16. Lissow and Barbie have been spending time together for nearly three years through the HOPE mentoring program.

'She helps me by loving my life'

Be it gardening, playing Monopoly or going to dinner, bowling or the movies (Disney flicks are their favorite), Nancy Lissow and Barbie Lynk have a long list of shared activities. Well, the Backstreet Boys may not rate as highly for Lissow — she's a grandmother of two — as they do with 13-year-old Barbie.

Perhaps the most valuable part of their relationship is the positive influence Lissow offers when Barbie's having a tough day.

"She helps me by loving my life. She helps me when I'm sad," said Barbie.

Lissow and Barbie have been friends for nearly three years through the HOPE (Helping One Person Excel) youth mentoring program. Operated by Catholic Charities of Livingston County, HOPE, which resembles the Big Brothers/Big Sisters national program, recently celebrated its fifth anniversary.

Kim Ruliffson, HOPE program director, and her assistant, Fobin Krupp, match Livingston County children who are referred by schools and social-service agencies with adults over age 21. The general age range for children beginning the program is 6 to 14.

Mentors and children are screened carefully before being matched. From there, mentors are required to volunteer at least four hours per month. Ruliffson, who asks that they make at least a one-year commitment, said most HOPE matches do

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— Nancy Lissow

last that long, with many of the relationships extending into a child's teen and young-adult years. Overall, Ruliffson said, 85 matches have been made since the program began.

Mentors should have their own transportation and live either in, or near, Livingston County. Ruliffson said the program has a great need for male mentors — most HOPE children are matched with an adult of the same sex, and 29 of the 37 youths on the waiting list are boys. Needs are particularly strong in the Mount Morris, Nunda and Dansville areas.

Through HOPE, mentors can help youths who may have "adjustment difficulties at home, in school or in the community," Ruliffson said. As examples of such difficulties she cited struggling with studies; absenteeism; disruption in the household due to a parental separation; getting in trouble with the law; and having trouble making friends. In addition, Livingston County presents the potential for isolation due to its rural setting, she said, noting that "Some families don't have transportation or a phone."

Activities can be geared toward skill building in such areas as gardening, stacking wood, or washing and waxing a car. Among the suggested social events are visits to museums, zoos, sporting events or movies — activities Ruliffson noted are commonplace to many, but can be rare opportunities for HOPE children.

Ruliffson said it might take several months for a child to learn to trust a mentor. Therefore, mentors should be open-minded about the child's personality and attire, and follow through on scheduled visits. "Flexibility and accountability are really the big cornerstones. You need to be

consistent and reliable for the child, because most of them have suffered disappointment in their lives," Ruliffson said.

She added that 80 to 85 percent of HOPE youths are from single-parent households. For instance, Barbie has moved several times between her mother's home in Mount Morris and a foster family in Lima.

Ruliffson said most children experience an increase in self-esteem due to their HOPE experience. A good example would be Barbie, who says she's been more motivated to exercise and study through Lissow's encouragement.

Lissow and her husband Bill, parishioners at St. Patrick's/Holy Angels in Mount Morris and Nunda, have been involved with HOPE since its inception. For two years Bill has served as a mentor for Jeremy Carroll and previously was a mentor for Jeremy's brother, Lenny.

Jeremy said he and Bill Lissow enjoy attending hockey and baseball games — they're both Yankees fans — as well as going to Minnehan's, a popular amusement facility. Jeremy also visits the Lissows' house for dinner and assists with the cows on their farm.

"(HOPE) gives me more chances to do stuff, to have someone to talk to," said Jeremy, who lives in Nunda with his single mother. He describes his mentor as "outgoing, very energetic."

Jeremy recently celebrated his 16th birthday. Will one of the activities now be for Bill to teach him to drive? "Hopefully," Jeremy said with a laugh.

Bill, a board member of Catholic Charities of Livingston County, said he values his involvement with HOPE, remarking, "With Jeremy, and his brother before, I enjoy what I can offer them. It gives them the opportunity to see things they otherwise wouldn't have seen."

Nancy Lissow said she realized the value of her mentoring while playing a tape Barbie had compiled for her of songs by Barbie's beloved Backstreet Boys. Right in the middle of the tape, she found that Barbie had recorded a personal message.

"Barbie started talking about how she really enjoyed doing things with me and hoping we would be friends forever. I mean, I'm in the car crying," Nancy said.

EDITOR'S NOTE: To learn more about the HOPE program, call 585/658-4466, go to www.aboutccic.org or e-mail hopenmentoring@hotmail.com.



Barbie has covered the walls of her bedroom with pictures of her favorite band, the Backstreet Boys.