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Community Corner

Orange County Mentors With Big Hearts Win Big Of The Year Award

These Orange County mentors went the extra mile to help those in need. Now they are celebrated with the prestigious Big of the Year award.

By Ashley Ludwig, Patch Staff | Jan 26, 2018 12:06 pm ET

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IRVINE, CA — Two Orange County residents made a big difference in the lives of others in 2017. The Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County and the Inland Empire, a one-to-one youth mentoring organization, today announces its 2018 Big of the Year award recipients.

Andrew Suarez and Allison Hata were selected for making a significant impact on the life of a child through one-to-one mentorship and demonstrating excellence as advocates of Big Brothers Big Sisters. They will be recognized along with eight Big of the Year finalists at a Jan. 31 Big Night celebration held at Twenty Eight restaurant in Irvine.

Suarez, a resident of Buena Park, began volunteering in 2014 as a mentor to Little Brother Luis.

Raised by a single mother, Suarez's coaches were his only male role models; their influence fueled his desire to pay it forward and support a child growing up in similar circumstances.

Luis, now age 10, came to Big Brothers Big Sisters through the GRIP (Gang Reduction & Intervention Partnership) program in Anaheim after telling police officers he was getting into physical fights at school because he didn't have a father to defend him.

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Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County
on Thursday



This #ThankYourMentor Day, we extend our congratulations and gratitude to the 2018 Big Brother of the Year: Andrew!

Andrew and Luis have made a lot of memories.

Andrew began volunteering in 2014 as a mentor to Luis. Luis, now age 10, came to Big Brothers Big Sisters through the GRIP (Gang Reduction & Intervention Partnership) program in Anaheim after telling police officers he was getting into physical fights at school because he didn't have a father to defend him.... See More



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With Suarez in his life, Luis has someone to help him work through his aggression and channel his excess energy into positive pursuits, such as learning new sports. As a result of Suarez's involvement, Luis no longer gets in fights at school and has overcome his fear of baseball. "From high school graduation and the first day of college to when he starts a family of his own, I will always be there for Luis," Suarez said. "This is just the start of a lifelong friendship."

In addition to mentoring Luis, Suarez is a founding member of the newly established LEADING Big auxiliary group that fundraises on behalf of Big Brothers Big Sisters and chairs the agency's volunteer-led recruitment committee.

Hata, of Irvine, matched with Little Sister Kyarra in 2008 and has spent the past decade helping the now-16-year-old pursue her dream of working in aerospace. The match bonded over the shared experience of being raised by a single mother who worked long hours, and has since navigated obstacles together that includes the family's frequent relocation and Kyarra's enrollment in a self-paced homeschooling program.

"My family has been through many rough times, moving from city to city for years on-end. The circumstances were beginning to change my view on the world and what it had to offer, and so I

opened up to Allison," Kyarra said. "She reminds me that life is a race and obstacles will always be ahead of me, but just as there are obstacles, there are also routes around them."

When it became apparent that homeschooling would pose challenges for Kyarra in meeting requirements for attending college, Hata helped her break down her educational process step-by-step. She also continues to foster Kyarra's interest in STEM with activities like tours of SpaceX and NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Kyarra is set to graduate from high school this spring, one year earlier than her peers, and has plans to study aerospace engineering.



Since becoming a volunteer, Hata has joined Big Brothers Big Sisters as director of marketing and communications, furthering her dedication to provide mentorship to children in need.

"Kyarra inspires me to be my best self, someone worthy of being called her sister," Hata said.

"She has grown from a timid 7-year-old afraid of meeting new people into a confident, compassionate and mature young adult. I am so grateful to be part of her life as she continues to persevere in the face of every challenge thrown her way."

Big Brothers Big Sisters also recognizes the 2018 Big of the Year finalists:

Friday, January 26, 2018

- Lawford Brossman
- Heather Flores
- Adam Go
- Jane Go
- Steve Harrison
- Desiree Lasiewski
- Aimee Richter
- Tommy Thompson

The top honors are bestowed annually in January on Thank Your Mentor Day, part of the longstanding National Mentoring Month public awareness campaign.

The local campaign is powered by Irvine-based Mazda North American Operations (MNAO), a proud sponsor that believes in the ability of youth mentoring to make a life-changing impact for children in the community.

Photos, courtesy Big Brothers, Big Sisters of Orange County

LINK: <https://patch.com/california/lakeforest-ca/orange-county-mentors-big-hearts-win-big-year-award>