



Cable Hoover/Independent
Armani Brieno, left, and Wayne Wilcken sit together while they wait for a meeting at Big Brothers Big Sisters office Wednesday. Brieno and Wilcken have been matched together through the program for about four months.

A helping hand

Big Brothers Big Sisters sought as mentors

By Leslie Wood
For the Independent

GALLUP — Wayne Wilcken and Armani Brieno are a perfect match for Big Brothers Big Sisters.

The effortless nature of their friendship is evident as Wilcken encourages 11-year-old Brieno to practice newly learned guitar chords Wednesday outside the non-profit organization's downtown office.

The pair have a deal going. If Brieno masters seven major chords, 10 songs and three scales, he will earn a donated electric guitar.

"He's almost a third of the way there," Wilcken said of Brieno's quick progress. "... He has a great memory."

The pair was matched through the local Big Brothers Big Sisters program three months ago and automatically hit it off. They meet twice a week to hike, fish, cook, bowl, roller skate or Brieno's favorite, eat Subway sandwiches.

Sarah Luginbuhl, the community coordinator for Big Brothers and Big Sisters, said the organization recently began a summer initiative to create more successful pairs like Wilcken and Brieno. The organization is most dire for male volunteers to match with the 18 boys who are on a wait list to join the program. Two of the waiting boys are Brieno's younger brothers.

"There is a real need for male mentors," Luginbuhl said.

The effort, entitled 100 men in 100 days, is an



Eleven-year-old Armani Brieno looks over the edge of the conference table during a meeting at Big Brothers Big Sisters office Wednesday. Big Brothers Big Sisters is currently trying to recruit more men to serve as mentors for children like Brieno.

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initiative sponsored by the organization's northern New Mexico chapter, which includes Gallup, to recruit as many volunteers as possible to meet the surge in demand.

"There are quite a few boys wanting to be involved," Luginbuhl said. "We would really like to reach out to more men to participate."

The local chapter was formed about a year ago and boasts 15 volunteer/child pairs. The program is funded through state grants and three annual fundraisers, which

include a leadership luncheon in the fall.

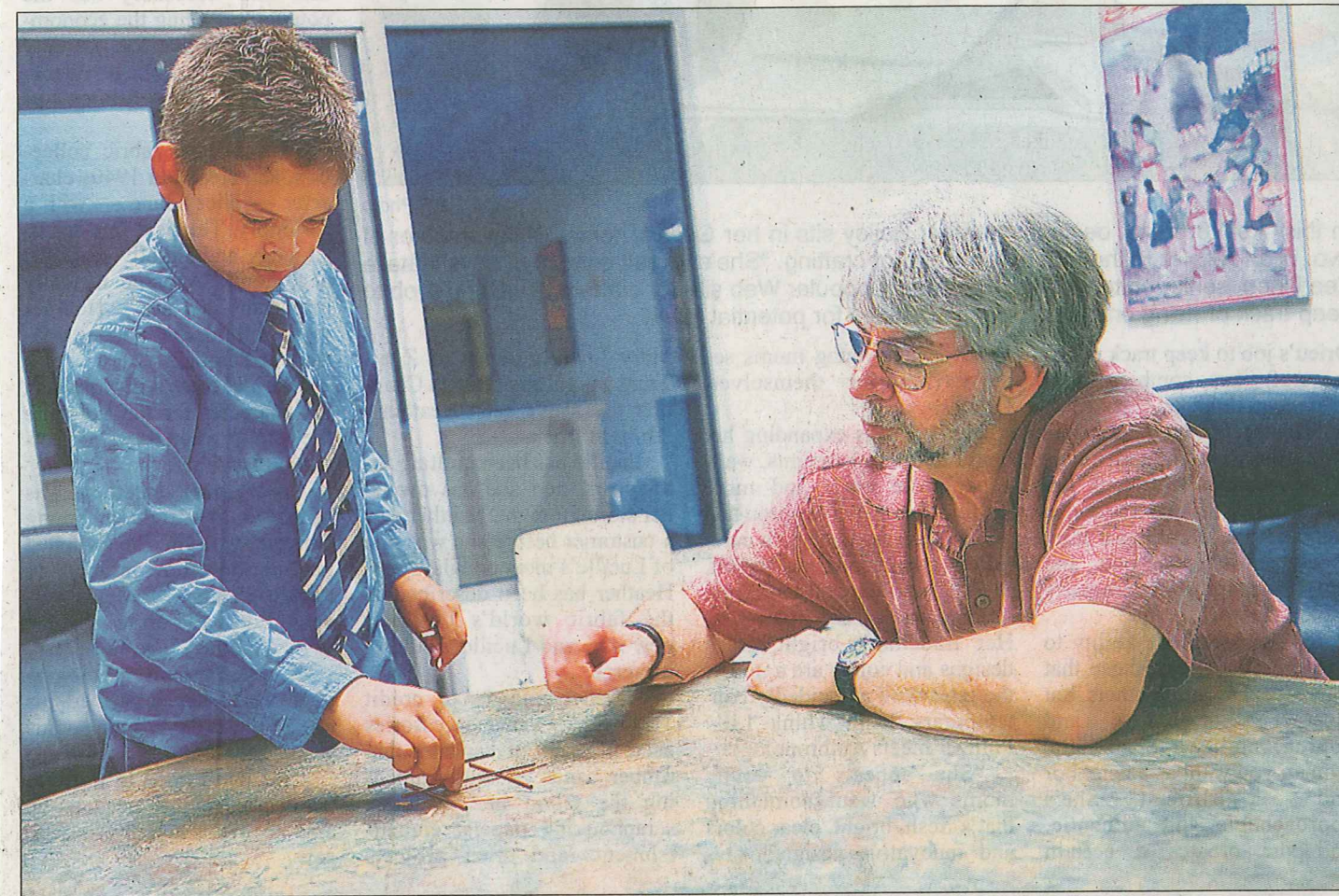
Luginbuhl said the process to become a big brother or sister is relatively simple. Volunteers undergo a two hour interview and an extensive background check, which includes fingerprint submissions to both state and federal agencies.

Once the interview stage is complete, the volunteer is matched with a McKinley County child, between the ages of 5 to 15, according to his or her preferences and interests.

The pair is then encouraged to meet two to four times a month to engage in whatever activities interest them. Luginbuhl said it's not necessary to spend money during the meetings and recommends volunteers incorporate their little sister or brother in activities in which they are already involved.

She said many of the involved children are self-referred or referred by schools or pediatricians. "Many of the children are from single family

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Armani Brieno, left, and Wayne Wilcken play a game of tic-tac-toe during a meeting at Big Brothers Big Sisters office Wednesday. Brieno and Wilcken have been matched together through the program for about four months.

Bigs

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homes, but that's not a prerequisite," she said.

Brieno said he heard of the program during a commercial on the Cartoon Network. He turned the television's volume up to tip his mom off about the opportunity.

"I turned it up real loud," he said.

Wilcken, a school counselor with 20 years of mental health experience, said he's been interested in service all his life and that's the primary motivation for his involvement.

"I've realized I'm not going to live forever and I really want to give back," he said. "... Ultimately, it's a way I can pass on that energy that's

been given to me throughout my life."

Wilcken said he is partial to Brieno's age group and that's why he chose Armani as his little brother.

"There's a big shift they go through physically and emotionally," he said. "... I like learning about Armani and spending time with him."

Luginbuhl said she is proud

of Wilcken and Brieno's budding friendship. She said some pairings are so successful they last until the child graduates high school and beyond.

"They are an exceptional match," she said.

Information: Luginbuhl, (505)

728-8356 or visit

www.bbbs.org/northernnm