



Paige Arnof-Fenn (left)
and Sheila Collins.

"I felt a connection with her. She was my first role model."

SHEILA SAYS: People have this impression that girls cannot do math. When I did my Ph.D. in pure mathematics, there were only three other female students, and then one dropped out. You have to have a certain amount of intelligence, yes, but I really wanted my female students to succeed because so many of them—especially when Paige was a student—were told that they should just be mommies and that math was a boys' subject. And that drove me insane.

PAIGE ARNOF-FENN: 42, marketer, Cambridge, Massachusetts

SHEILA COLLINS: 63, teacher, New Orleans

PAIGE: I was never a girl who wanted to be a ballerina, a nurse, or even a mom. When grown-ups asked what I wanted to do, I'd put my hand on my hip and say, "I want to get an M.B.A. from Harvard Business School." I was always good with numbers, and since my dad was a commercial banker, my family joked that I was a chip off the old block. But all the senior people at my father's bank were men. My mom stayed at home, as did most of my friends' moms. And I remember my grandfather telling me that I was too headstrong and no man in his right mind would ever marry me.

I was 15 when I took Dr. Collins's math class, and I felt a special connection with her. She was good with numbers, she had a Ph.D., and she was married. She proved to me that it was cool for girls to be good at math. She was my first role model. And she gave me the confidence to hold my own at Stanford, where I studied economics; on Wall Street, where I started my career; and at Harvard, where I did get my M.B.A. I even found a partner who supports what I do as much as I support him, proving my granddad wrong.

I still go back to visit Dr. Collins. She's now the head of the math department at my former school. I have poked my head in her classroom, and she's still as tough as ever. And I know there are probably little girls sitting in there that feel the same way I did.

"My friends said I have a cool big sister, and I know I do."

SANDRA SLAUGHTER: 13, student, Miami

MARJ HAMILTON: 43, marketer, Miami

SANDRA: The first time I met Marj, two years ago, she came to my house to take me out for ice cream and told me she was my new big sister. I have an older sister, but she lives far away, so I was happy to get another sister, and I thought that Marj looked nice and had a cool accent. She's from Scotland and has strange words for things, like she calls a bathing suit a "costume," and if we're going to the movies, she'll say, "Let's go see the picture." She also told me that Scottish men wear kilts, which are skirts, when they get married, and I thought that was funny.

I see Marj almost every week. She helps me with homework, particularly math. I was failing, but Marj sat down with me and explained each problem step by step. My grades got better, and my teacher was so proud of me. So was my mom. I went from F's to C's and am even getting a few A's, too. She has made such a big difference in my life. I even passed this important state test, which I could not have done without her. My mom says Marj is an angel.

Marj has taught me more than math, like how to cook things like shepherd's pie and Moroccan chicken and how to swim. I started taking lessons at her apartment—she has a pool—and I'm getting pretty good. She also taught me how to control myself. I used to get in a lot of fights, but Marj said, "When you get mad, take a deep breath and focus on calming down." I tried it, and it really works. We do a lot of fun things, too, like going shopping and to museums. She even took me to a Beyoncé concert. We got dressed up and danced all night. That was the most fun ever. That's why I want everyone to know that Marj is a very special person. When I told my friends about it, they said I have a cool big sister, and I know I do. Now they all want a big sister just like her.

MARJ SAYS: I became a big sister through the Big Brothers Big Sisters program to give back, because I feel I have been so lucky in my life. The organization asked me for a minimum one-year commitment, and I agreed. But now when anyone asks, "How long will you do it for?" I say, "Forever." At first, I thought I'd be helping a little girl, but now I feel like Sandra is my sister. I feel lucky that she's in my life.