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Suffern Life

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Change a Life, Build a Future

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Rockland County help to make a difference.

by Lisa Iannucci
Editor

Laura Smith is a single woman with two young children. She admits that it can be difficult to do it all on her own. She’s divorced, works full-time and her children’s father is incarcerated. Last year, she wished that she had some help, someone to do more with her daughter Julianne, or be a father figure for her son, Kyle.

“We were at the Big Brothers Big Sisters walk last year when someone asked me if Kyle was part of the program,” says Smith, whose name was changed for this article to protect her privacy. “It was then that it struck me that he could be.”

She contacted the organization and asked her children how they would feel about the opportunity. “Both said they wanted to do it and that it sounded exciting,” says Smith.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Rockland County is a full-service mentoring organization serving at-risk youth between the ages of 7 and 18 who live in one-parent households throughout all Rockland communities.

Meet Bigs: Tom and Denise Stephens

Tom Stephens and his wife Denise knew that Big Brothers Big Sisters was a well-regarded organization. It was after a friend signed up to be a mentor that the Tappan couple decided to look into the possibility of doing the same thing. The couple already had two high school-aged children, but like most parents of growing teenagers discover, those children are spending more time doing their own thing.

“I had a lot of time to give, I love kids and I used to coach hockey,” says Tom. “I thought this would be a great opportunity.”

After passing a vigorous background check, Stephens said the couple read all the research that the organization recommended. In the program, a child has the opportunity to ask for either an individual Big Brother or Sister or a couple, which means they can have both a Big Brother and Sister. Kyle chose both and was matched with Tom and Denise.

Meet a Little: Kyle

At the initial meeting last year, the Stephens, Kyle and a representative from the organization got to know each other. It went smoothly. “I had mild butterflies, but it was nothing terrible,” says Stephens. “We hit it off right away. Immediately we made plans to go on an outing.”

Stephens describes Kyle as a bright kid who loves to talk and express himself. They have already gone on several outings together, including bowling, a car show, tennis, basketball and ice skating. “Denise did pumpkin carving with him one day,” says Stephens, who meets with Kyle approximately every two weeks for about four hours at a time.

Meet a Big: Jessica Fein

Jessica Fein is a Rockland County attorney who is single and has no children, but describes herself as family-oriented and has a lot of love to give. “I am not there yet personally, but getting involved with Big Brothers Big Sisters is a family-oriented opportunity,” says Fein.

Fein says she had a basic understanding of what the organization was about, but admits that she was concerned about being matched with, and being able to handle, a child who had any behavioral, emotional or physical issues. “It wasn’t a problem, but I wanted to be able to help them,” she says. “The organization was very open about any issues the child may have, so I would know ahead of time. You have an option that you can walk away without any pressure on you.”

She started the application process last February and with the background check and other paperwork, it took about two months to complete everything. Then she met her little sister, nine-year-old Julianne.

Meet a Little: Julianne

“Juliannne is smart and thoughtful,” says Fein, “She has grownup thoughts that are so advanced and she’s very creative, so we do crafts and go to movies.”

It was at their first meeting that they ate sushi. Thanks to being self-employed, Fein’s schedule is more flexible than most, so she was able to meet Juliannne after school and take her to a movie. “You need to make the time, but it’s not that demanding. Big Brothers Big Sisters and the mentors sponsor events that all the kids and littles can enjoy together.

This event was held at the home of Jessica Fein, a Big who has been with BBBS for several months. Photo by BBBS
ing."

"It's extremely rewarding," says Fein. "She's more talkative and outgoing than she was when I first met her."

According to Gillian Ballard, CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Rockland County, the organization has been effective in making a significantly positive, direct, and lasting impact on the lives of young people. Fully-screened, professionally supported adult mentors are matched in a partnership for up to 11 years with disadvantaged children and youth from low-income families.

"They assist in personal goal setting, promoting academic achievement, and offering inspiration to grow into healthy productive adults as a preventive approach to resistance and avoidance of negative peer influences, anti-social behavior, delinquency, criminal activities, substance/alcohol abuse, school violence, and street gang involvement/membership," says Ballard.

Ballard says she feels privileged to be the Big Brothers Big Sisters chief of staff and know that each day at the office is tremendously fulfilling. "I work with a wonderfully dedicated staff that has such a high work ethic that the community honors us continuously," she says. "Our board of directors, chaired by Judge Scott Ugell, is a loyal and accountable team of community leaders who consider it a commitment to support the organization. Last year, the group's Prevention Education for Delinquent Youth received an award from the Rockland Pan Hellenic Society.

**Meet a Big: Vicki Joseph**

Vicki Joseph lives in Pomona and works in corporate education. She designs training programs and materials for the insurance industry and has master's degree in adult learning. About 10 years ago, she had a major shift in her life and decided that

Continued on next page
she wanted to give back to the community. "I saw this program advertised in the media and felt that what a gift it would be to make a difference in a child's life," she says.

Her little sister, Elizabeth, who lives in Suffern, has been in her life for about five years. "What can I say about Elizabeth?" says Joseph. "She is smart, pretty, compassionate, and caring. We have a strong bond and I would say she is great!"

The day they met, Vicki was very nervous. "I walked into the house to meet my little and the family was so warm," she says. "We signed an agreement and hugged. Each time we went out I learned so much about what she was going through and I just listened. The connection was very rewarding."

She says she's had so many great moments of being a Big Sister. "But I remember having a conversation with my little, who was so concerned about somebody else being happy," says Vicki. "She looked at me and repeated something I had said a few years back, 'I know, I am only responsible for my happiness.' Can it get any better? At that point, you know they were listening and that you made a difference in this child's life."

For those who want to participate, Vicki offers this advice.

"It seems like it is very time consuming and everyone is so busy," she says. "By the time a few months have gone by, the little becomes part of your life and you can't wait to see them. What was important before, is moved and you make time to spend with this fabulous human being."

Meet a Big: Adam Browning

Adam Browning is 24 and grew up and resides in Monsey. After graduating SUNY Binghamton with a BA in Psychology, he worked for the National Institute for People with Disabilities of New Jersey as a residential counselor for adults with developmental disabilities.

"I was driving around with my friend when we saw an advertisement for Big Brothers Big Sisters on the back of a bus," says Browning. "We talked about how it would be a good service to donate some time to a local organization, and BB/BS seemed like the best idea. I knew that mentoring a child would be fun and rewarding, and both the little brother I was paired up with and myself would greatly benefit from the relationship."

The first day he went to pick up his little brother, Daniel, Browning admits he was nervous. "We had previously decided that we were going to go to the batting cages as our first outing," he says. "I could tell that Daniel was very excited because..."

Adjunct Services

Here is just a sample of programs from the Big Brothers Big Sisters of Rockland organization.

- **ROCKLAND COUNTY MENTORING COLLABORATIVE** — individual, one-to-one, school-based programs. Peer mentoring after-school program serving high school students from Spring Valley High School who are low academic achievers with social behavioral issues and at risk of not graduating high school.

- **JUMP** — One-to-one after-school-based mentoring program serving 7-15-year-old at-risk youth from the village of Haverstraw. Mentors are 18 and older from the community and/ or college students, trained by BBBS in Life Skills, Anger Management, Bias Awareness, Conflict Resolution, Gun Prevention, and Career Preparedness.

- **COURT ORDERED SUPERVISED VISITATION** — Family Court-mandated visitation in a supervised and structured environment in Pomona, NY. A year-round Child Advocacy Program providing supervised visitation between non-custodial parents and their children via a court order for up to 2 hours per week.

- **FIT FOR LIFE** — An adjunct program to the Juvenile Mentoring Program serving 7-15-year-old medium- to high-risk youth. Program curriculum involves pre- and post-testing of healthy eating habits, safe and healthy life choices with a focus on youth obesity, and physical exercises. Professional weight trainers presented on a bi-weekly basis.

- **PREVENTIVE EFFORTS FOR JUVENILE YOUTH (PEDY)** — Intervention mentoring program providing life skills, academic tutoring, career preparedness to youth referred by the Spring Valley Judicial Court system between the ages of 16-15 years as an alternative option to incarceration.

- **FAMILY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM** — serving BBBS participant families throughout all Rockland County communities.
in our initial meeting he had mentioned that he had never hit a baseball before. I was also excited to teach him.

When they arrived at the batting cages, Daniel immediately put on a helmet, grabbed a bat, and got into the cage like he had done a million times. “I had to show him the proper way to stand in the batter’s box and the correct way to hold a bat, but I could tell he was just anxious to hit the ball,” says Browning. “I put the token into the machine and the pitches started coming. When the 12 pitches were done, Daniel gave me his phone and asked if I could take video to show his mom. So I turned on the video, put another token in the machine, and taped him hitting a baseball for the first time. We both hit a few more times, and then we went to get ice cream. It was definitely a successful first outing.”

But it was at this summer’s Big Brothers Big Sisters pool party that really showed Browning the positive difference that he was making in Daniel’s life. “Every mentor has made an impact in the life of a child, and you could see this in full swing while adults, children, parents, hogs, littles, board members, and other volunteers came together just to have a great time swimming for a day,” he says. “The genuine look of joy and excitement on Daniel and the other little’s faces made me realize that donating my time is 100 percent worth it every time.”

“The genuine look of joy and excitement on Daniel and the other little’s faces made me realize that donating my time is 100 percent worth it every time,” says mentor Adam Browning.

Giving back

If you want to volunteer, Browning suggests thinking back to when you were a kid. “How cool it would have been to have an older figure in your life, other than your mom, dad, brother, sister, aunt, uncle, or cousin, to go out with, talk to, play sports with, play video games with, or go to a movie with,” he says. “BB/BS is the only local organization where just a few hours a month can change a life.”

Even a successful organization still needs help. “BB/BS of Rockland County is a county contract agency, which has enjoyed funding from the federal and state agencies over many years,” says Ballard. “Due to the fiscal concerns of government, the agency has received a decrease of almost 46 percent of funding over the past three years. Increased fundraising activities and private foundation grants have buoyed its general operating budget, but the agency remains concerned over future financial support since the program does not charge any fees for its service to the families of children enrolled into the program.”

Laura is very pleased with how it’s going for the kids. “Both children hit it off right away with their bigs,” she says. “I’m so happy they have someone to lean on. The bigs guide them about stuff for the future too and they are there for us.”