



Brotherly Love

By Mark Ray

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When Travis Williams, a claims adjustor at Humana, bought a car last year, his father co-signed on the loan. It didn't seem to be a big deal at the time, but then Williams heard his barber talking about how his own father had refused to do the same for him. "That made me think about all the times he'd been there for me," Williams said of his father.

Jeff Tang, a reporter for WAVE-TV, knew firsthand the rewards of working with young people, having taught history and language arts two summers at a program for gifted inner-city girls in Cleveland. When he moved to Louisville last year, he was eager to find a way to continue working with kids.

Rob Ledington, a loan officer with First Rate Mortgage in Clarksville, began looking for volunteer opportunities five years ago after his marriage ended. He wanted to do something that would make a difference in the community and fit into his busy schedule.

What he found—and what Williams and Tang found—was Big Brothers Big Sisters of Kentuckiana, the local branch of America's oldest and largest youth mentoring agency. They found a lot more, however. They found long-lasting friendships with their new Little Brothers (or Littles, as the agency calls them).

Big Brothers Big Sisters offers a deceptively simple program, creating one-on-one matches between men and women and kids in need. But across months of fast-food meals, tutoring and trips to plays and theme parks, those matches often became as deep and meaningful as those between, well, between older and younger siblings in any family.

Stacy Funk, the agency's director of marketing and special events, gets to see the program's successes firsthand. "It's really amazing, the growth that happens," she said. "Most of the friendships last a lifetime."

Of course, a lifetime can seem like an awfully long time, and Funk is quick to point out that long-term commitments aren't required. While the traditional mentoring program asks for a one-year commitment, the agency also has programs that last for just four months or for a school semester.

Commitment wasn't a problem for Ledington when he was matched with Jacob Carroll, then 11 years old, in 2000. "I look at this as a lifelong commitment," he said. "That's our goal: to keep it going forever; he's like a son to me."

If Jacob is like a son, then Ledington is a lot like a father. Jacob's own father died of cancer when Jacob was just five years old, so Ledington has been a father figure to him, providing a male counterpoint to Jacob's mom, who Ledington said does "a great job."

Their joint efforts have paid off. Jacob, a rising senior at Male Traditional High School, is an honor-roll student and drum major for his school's band. He recently got his driver's license and works part-time at Mall St. Matthews.

Funk said Jacob's background is fairly typical of the program's Littles, although not all come from single-parent families. "The majority are just kids with untapped potential," she said, including kids from unstable families, kids whose parents work multiple jobs or kids who face self-esteem, academic or social issues.

Academic success serves as a reward in Williams' relationship with 14-year-old Eric Centeno, who just completed the seventh grade at Kennedy Metro Middle School. "I'm willing to do anything as long as he keeps things up on his end in terms of behavior and grades," Williams said. "I don't want to reward bad behavior."

Rewarding good behavior, on the other hand, is easy. The pair enjoy movies, videogames, eating out and just driving around in Williams' truck. "I think he uses me sometimes for a ride," Williams said with a grin.

Williams attends Eric's sporting events—he wrestles and plays football—and they've been to the gym a time or two.

Sports is also a big part of Jeff Tang's relationship with 14-year-old Larry Martin a rising eighth grader at Moore Traditional Middle School. "Sports is pretty much the thing that connects us," Tang said.

(When the two play basketball, you begin to wonder about the terminology Big Brothers Big Sisters uses. Tang is 5' 5", while Larry is 6' 3", so the Little is really the Big in this case.)

It's no surprise that Tang and Larry connect so well, according to Funk. A big part of the initial screen process involves making matches that make sense. "We want you to involve them in things you normally do," she said. "It doesn't have to be just Kentucky Kingdom and snow cones."

Social workers also work closely with Bigs throughout the first year to get them started off right; optional classes cover everything from attention deficit disorder to scholarship opportunities. The agency also host special activities throughout the year

and offers participants free tickets to arts and sporting events donated by the agency's supporters.

Getting free baseball tickets is easier than getting volunteers, however. Larry, for example, had been waiting a year and a half to find a match in the program before Tang stepped forward.

He's not alone either. Big Brothers Big Sisters of Kentuckiana currently has more than 400 children on its waiting list—not counting the two thousand it would like to serve in schools through the community-wide Every 1 Reads initiative.

The agency advertises its need for mentors in a variety of ways, but increased awareness comes at a cost. "For every one volunteer, we get five more children," she said.

Still, they persevere, knowing that every match they do make can have a profound impact on someone's life—and not just a child's. Funk remembers saying to one Big Sister about her Little Sister, "She's so lucky to have you."

"No," the woman replied. "I'm so lucky to have her."