

# THE SUN TEEN WELFARE

Home

News

Teen welfare

## Local Big Brothers Big Sisters expands mentoring services in Inland Empire



Volunteer mentor and Chino resident Tom Caporale, left, has been a Big Brother to Noah for 10 years, guiding him along the right path and helping him reach his potential. Noah will graduate from high school in May. *Courtesy photo*

By **Michel Nolan**, *The Sun*

POSTED: 02/11/17, 1:32 PM PST

UPDATED: 1 DAY AGO

0 COMMENTS

It's about the "Bigs" helping the "Littles."

"Mentors" helping "mentees."

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County and the Inland Empire announces a one-to-one mentoring program to help young people ages 18-25 — the kids who age out of the system — who “fall through the cracks.”

And falling through the cracks can hurt.

The program engages adult volunteers as mentors and matches them with at-risk children.

This one-to-one relationship between the “Big” and the “Little” helps these children gain self-esteem and trust adults, stay in school, and avoid drug and alcohol abuse.

Young people 18 and over have been underserved, and last year, 99 percent of these kids graduated from high school.

Since 2013, Big Brothers Big Sisters has seen 160 youth participants obtain their high school diplomas, for a 99 percent graduation rate.

While one-to-one mentoring is proven to improve high school graduation rates for Inland Empire youth, the loss of this support after the age of 18 can be difficult for those facing family and financial challenges.

In the past, the nonprofit was known for making one-to-one matches between volunteers and youth ages 6-18, but now, extended services will also serve high school graduates as they transition to college or career.

The local Big Brothers Big Sisters is the first of 15 affiliates in California to extend its services to this age group.

So, thanks to a program known as “Destination Future” young participants ages 18-25 can focus on paths to education through college or vocational schools, employment or enlistment.

The program is being funded through a \$1 million commitment in grants from local community partners.

These days, Montclair is their base, a move they made from San Bernardino for lack of space.

Big Brothers Big Sisters is unique, and not necessarily a brick-and-mortar service provider.

“The beauty of what we do is that we actually partner with lots of corporate and private partner agencies who allow us to have space, to do interviews and connect mentors and mentees, assessing their needs and making a match,” said Jennifer O’Farrell, executive director of the Inland Empire region of the chapter.

And they don’t even have to drive to Montclair.

So the agency can interview kids in the city of San Bernardino, making themselves more accessible to the community versus having volunteers and kids come to the Montclair office.

Because safety is the number one obligation to the children they serve, there is an in-depth screening process, history and background check on potential mentors.

They try to match lifelong friends.

Nationally, Big Brothers Big Sisters started 110 years ago.

The Orange County portion of the chapter was established 60 years ago, while the Inland Empire was not included until 2013.

Collectively, during this last year, the three-county chapter served 3,400 children.

The Inland Empire portion of the agency alone oversees 885 mentors and 885 young mentees in our huge two-county region.

“As a young agency, we are a start-up, but we have the 60-year best practices we can implement,” Jennifer told me.

Originally, the goal of the start-up IE segment was 420 mentors and mentees — a goal they far exceeded.

But there is still a waiting list of about 100 children,” Jennifer says.

And to be sure, there’s always a need for more mentors.

Because mentors don’t get paid — not even a stipend — young people see it as a positive.

“When you tell kids the mentors don’t get paid and are 100 percent volunteers, they are almost in shock because most people in their lives are paid to be with them,” Jennifer said. “To have somebody who wants to hang out with them out of the goodness of their hearts is important to a child because they think ‘Well, I must be special to have someone want to be with me.’”

So they look at themselves in a different way — they see themselves as worthy.

Mentorship between the ‘Bigs’ and the ‘Littles’ is a connection of the heart.

Tom Caporale of Chino understands this.

In May, the second little brother he guided through school will graduate from Don Lugo High School.

An Inland Empire mentor, Tom has helped guide Noah, now 18, since he was 8.

They have fun together — it’s a great relationship, says Tom.

“The best things we’ve done over the years are not Universal Studios, not Disneyland, Noah tells me. His favorite things are fishing, hiking — just hanging out,” Tom says.

Noah, whose father is not in his life, has become like one of the family for Tom, his wife, and grown stepchildren.

“Watching college football games is something our family loves to do. I love USC and my wife and the kids love Ohio State, so Noah has become a big Ohio State fan,” Tom laughed.

Mentoring just takes a few hours on weekends, according to Tom.

“For all these years — almost every other Sunday — we’ve been together,” he said.

Tom’s first Little Brother with the organization, Aaron, graduated from high school in 2013 and is now attending college.

His first mentee, Paul, graduated in 1982, but wasn’t with Big Brothers Big Sisters.

“Helping Paul gave me a feeling of satisfaction I carried with me for years,” Tom remembers, adding that it was the reason he decided to once again help kids succeed.

This commitment to helping kids has earned Tom the honor of 2017 “Big Brother of the Year” for making “a significant impact on the life of a child through one-to-one mentorship and demonstrating excellence as an advocate of Big Brothers Big Sisters.”

*Michel Nolan appears in The Sun on Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays. Reach her at mnolan@scng.com or on Twitter @MichelNolan.*