

The big impact of expending just a little bit of time

Lawyers embrace Big Brothers Big Sisters program

By Jan Pudlow
Senior Editor

What's an hour worth to an attorney? Another billable hour?

Or — consider doing what R.J. Haughey, president-elect of The Florida Bar Young Lawyers Division, does with an hour: On Wednesdays, instead of taking a lunch break, he eats a Power Bar and walks from his downtown Tampa firm on the 22nd floor to nearby Rampello School and kicks around a soccer ball on the playground with his 8-year-old "Little."



HAUGHEY

That time spent playing and talking and listening as a Big Brother, Haughey said, is both "simple and powerful."

"My Little Brother has never missed a day of school on the day I'm coming. He really enjoys it, and I think he finds comfort in the fact that somebody who wears a tie comes to see him and feels he is important enough that I spend an hour with him. We'll never know the full impact it's had until he's adult," said Haughey, who chairs the board of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Tampa Bay, Inc.

Even with their 4-year-old son and adopted newborn baby, Haughey's wife, April, also a lawyer, volunteers as a Big Sister.

Her Little Sister is 11-year-old Charlene, a fifth-grader at Roosevelt Elementary, a bright girl who wants to go to medical school. But she struggles with language arts because when she goes home, her family only speaks Creole. Because of the language barrier, her Haitian mother, who works in the laundry at a hotel, couldn't help her daughter with homework.

That's where April Haughey steps in, arriving at the school an hour a week to help Charlene practice words for her spelling test, writing paragraphs, and typing and editing essays on a library computer — because Charlene doesn't have a computer at home and has no ride to a library.

"Her grades haven't come out yet, but I know it's made a huge difference," April Haughey said.

The difference in this girl's life goes beyond better grades. When Charlene sang in the school program, and her mother could not attend, April Haughey was in the audience, and Charlene was smiling and waving proudly from the stage.

"It take me less time than going to get groceries," April Haughey said. Asked how long she will be Charlene's Big Sister, she answered: "Forever!"

Tampa lawyer Stephen Koch, CEO of the same BBBS group and recognized in 1999 as the National Big Brother of the Year, is armed with all kinds of statistics about the impact volunteer Big Brothers and Big Sisters have on the children:

- 84 percent of all mentored students improved academic performance and improved school behavior, and 82 percent had improved school attendance.
- A study by Dressel & Barnhill estimated that children with incarcerated parents may be almost six times more likely to become incarcerated themselves.
- For children who have a parent who does time in prison, 70 percent are more likely to follow in their parents' footsteps.

That last fact hits home with Koch, who is a Big Brother to a pair of 7-year-old twin boys, Richard and John, whose mother had been sent to prison and whose father is out of the picture.

"That statistic, as I say it aloud, blows me away. It's from a Justice Department study. If you can provide a child with a mentor and break that cycle, that's huge," Koch said.

Since he was matched with the twin boys last summer, Koch said, their mom has been released from prison and is at a halfway house trying to acclimate herself to being back home. Meanwhile, the boys live with an aunt in a trailer park and look forward to visits from their Big Brother they call Mr. Steve.

"These are just normal 7-year-old boys. Their aunt requested a Big for the boys, not because they are failing academically. They are second-graders who make the honor roll. Their problem is that they are always inside, in front of a TV or video game, overweight, and having some social issues," Koch said.

Along comes Mr. Steve, who whisks them out of the house, and takes them to ball games, swimming in the Gulf of Mexico, to see "Lion King" at the performing arts center, and even

their first real movie in a theater.

"Their aunt told me they loved movies. So last summer, I took them to see 'Ratatouille,' you know, the cartoon about the rat in Paris? I'm using my credit card to buy tickets, and one boy hollers through the ticket window: 'This is our first time to see a movie!' They had only watched movies on TV before this. They had to tell everybody this was their first time: to the lady who sold us popcorn, to the guy taking our tickets, to the people cleaning," Koch recalled.

When he told the boys they could pick the seats, the twins ran to the very front row and exclaimed: "These are the best seats! We are so lucky!"

Koch just laughed, agreeing with the boys: "You are so right. We have to get here early every time."

"Richard is leaning over looking at me saying, 'Mr. Steve, this is the best day of my life.' I had mixed feelings. It's always fun to experience something the first time with a child. But it also makes me sad, because if they haven't had this opportunity for economic reasons, they probably haven't had other opportunities," Koch said. "I bet a large number of kids below a certain poverty level have not seen the Gulf of Mexico. Go over the bridge, and there you are. We take so much for granted, we just forget."

In 2006, Big Brothers Big Sisters Association of Florida volunteers delivered mentoring

services in more than 240 schools throughout 300 Florida cities, touching the lives of more than 14,000 children and their families. In the Tampa area alone, Koch said, 700 children are on a waiting list, hoping to be matched with a Big Brother or Big Sister.

While it costs \$22,666 for one year of outpatient substance abuse rehabilitation, \$59,079 for a child to spend one year in the juvenile justice system, it only costs \$1,000 a year to provide a child with a mentor, Koch says.

What costs a volunteer an hour a week, Koch said, could pay dividends to young boys and girls for a lifetime.

Both Koch and the Haugheys can attest that attorneys make great Big Brothers and Big Sisters.

For more information, call (888) 293-2535, or visit www.bbbsfl.org.



STEPHEN KOCH of Tampa is a Big Brother to a pair of 7-year-old twin boys, Richard and John, whose mother had been sent to prison and whose father is out of the picture.