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Big Brothers Big Sisters has a ?Wow? moment after rough patch



By Brock Weir

There is a ?glimmer of hope? on the horizon for Sarah Dame.

Exceptional growth in York Region, and meeting the mentorship needs of the Region's children in need, have made the Aurora-based organization face ?a very rough few months,? according to Big Brothers Big Sisters of York's (BBBSY) Executive Director Sarah Dame.

BBBSY provides mentorship programs to local kids and meaningful relationships between ?Bigs? and at-risk or in-need ?Littles?, typically serving between 525 and 540 kids per year.

So far, 2016 has significantly bucked the trend.

?In our first six months of the year, we served over 720 children,? says Ms. Dame. ?This means the needs are growing and it is sad that when needs are growing, our funds are declining. We're out there pounding the pavement as much as we can, but donors are inundated with requests. Everybody has their hands out and that is just the state of affairs right now.

?Mentoring is such an essential service, but I think sometimes that is harder for us to communicate and we don't have the dollars to be as vocal as we want to be, but we have great support and it is a matter of having the dollars to get our word out.?

While one ?glimmer of hope? is BBBSY being selected as one of 15 community partners set to share the proceeds from this month's Wild, Wild West Hoedown hosted by Magna International, BBBSY had a ?Wow!? moment of their own on Friday when the Wow One-Day Painting team arrived on the Industrial Parkway South doorstep to give their offices ? and the home of one of their Littles ? a complete one-day makeover.

?Every year, when we get to the end of our peak season and we have reached all of our company goals, we look at it as giving back to the communities in which we work,? said Wow's Kim Rood, looking over the BBBSY's assessment room, which was given a new coat of eggplant purple, noting it is an initiative that has taken root across Wow's North American franchises.

It wasn't a complete surprise.

Wow was connected to BBBSY by Mayor Geoff Dawe after Mr. Rood contacted him to be pointed in the direction of a community organization that needed a bit of help. Mayor Dawe facilitated that connection and, after assessing their offices, realised there was

more they could do.

BBBSY then ran a contest for their Littles asking them to write down their best ?Wow moment? in working with their Big Brother or Big Sister and a little boy in Markham was chosen for the home makeover.

?We're going to be doing his bedroom and, because the size of the bedroom wasn't that big, I said I still have more people who can paint and we're going to be painting their living room and anything else we can do while we are there,? said Mr. Rood. ?We will probably be doing door, trim and baseboards and the team is going to be spending the whole day there painting until they are kind of tired!?

While the ?Little? and his family were having their own ?Wow? moment, so too was Ms. Dame, who says it is always a ?Wow moment? when someone in the community steps up to give back, particularly to help an organization like theirs.

?Because we're so small, sometimes it is hard for us to get financial support and this kind of support,? she says. ?We're really struggling. Hospital Foundations and Heart and Stroke and health-related foundations have huge offices and we have a pretty small office for the number of children we serve. We can talk about [these moments] all we want and we have passion, but when you hear [the moment] from a match? It's a wow moment when someone wants to give back and Kim just kept it going.?

And BBBSY will keep going, too.

Last year, they launched a ?Play Great? program, which will keep kids active ? and will be a program benefiting directly from Hoedown dollars. They are also looking to expand their In School Mentoring (ISM) program in which a volunteer mentor goes into the school providing one-on-one mentorship for an hour a week.

This September, is Big Brothers Big Sisters Month and promoting ISM mentoring, and recruiting volunteers for the program, will be a primary focus.

?We have schools all wanting our programs and they want us back, but we only have as many volunteers as we can put in schools,? says Ms. Dame. ?I can't pull everyone together and say, ?Let's do more programs!' because they are free and we don't have the money. We can't go and do more programs without the dollars. We had a very rough few months, but there is some glimmer of hope happening and I am excited about that. The team has never been stronger but the needs are growing. In my other life, I didn't see the need as much as I see it now and now I am presented with it every day.

?We're defining what a Big Brother Big Sister relationship looks like over the next century and our group programs are becoming such a need. There is tremendous impact there. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to know one-to-one has a greater impact.?