

Big Brothers Big Sisters focuses on wait list ahead of school reopening

With students unable to attend school for the most of the last half of the 2020-2021 school year, not only have they been missing out on the camaraderie that comes with in-person learning, but others have been missing something equally important: in-school mentorship.

As the pieces fall into place for the 2021-2022 school year, Big Brothers Big Sisters of York is focused on gearing up their in-school mentorship program once again, initiatives that will also come with a virtual component as we get back to some degree of normalcy.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of York (BBBSY) was recently announced as one of 30 area non-profits to receive funds from the Hoedown Community Foundation, a pot of money established by Magna International to benefit community partners who would otherwise share in proceeds from the annual Magna Hoedown, an event which was cancelled for the second year running in 2021 due to the global pandemic.

The timing of this cash infusion was 'perfect' as they ready this two-prong approach, says BBBSY's Suzanne Boucher, while tackling at the same time an expansive wait list of kids looking for mentorship.

'Our team has put together multiple new virtual mentoring programs as well as our original community foundation programs,' says Ms. Boucher of programs that have served the community for more than 51 years. 'This is almost the absolute perfect timing when we're able to get more volunteers to help provide these programs. Usually every year we serve anywhere between 450 and 550 children on average; this year, by July, we had already served over 560 kids. We're probably going to hit close to double that this year. That is what our program is expecting, especially once the school year starts again.'

'This funding came at such an incredible time. Our wait list has been growing and we just want to keep the momentum going.'

Through various shutdowns, lockdowns, and redevelopment of Ontario's reopening plans, it has been more important than ever for BBBSY to ensure existing mentorships between adults and youth are maintained when meeting up face-to-face has been more difficult than ever.

In Step 3, whether they proceed to face-to-face interaction again or maintain that virtual connection is up to the mentorship partners, but BBBSY encourages virtual interaction right now.

'In this digital day and age, our kids are thriving through the virtual mentoring programs because they have the opportunity to talk in the chat room where they are a lot more open,' says Boucher. 'A lot of our in-person mentoring programs, some of them are a little bit shier, don't really speak up as much, but we're noticing a trend online where kids are a lot more talkative and they communicate a lot more easily. If they are not having a good day, they will keep their cameras off where they feel a lot more comfortable.'

'We definitely want to keep this virtual mentoring program alive. Even when we get back to the new normal and get our in-person mentoring programs back to where they were, we definitely want to still build on this virtual aspect because this is a way that we can connect some of our young people [in different] geographical areas where we have volunteers. We want to keep this going and build off of it to help mend our waiting lists so they're not just on there for months and months. Even when we're back to the new normal [we want] to at least have some connection until we do find somebody within their area to have an in-person mentoring relationship.'

Helping to foster both the continuation of mentorship programs and the easing of the wait lists will be a return for Golf for Kids' Sake, one of BBBSY's signature community fundraisers, on August 26. It is their first in-person fundraising event since COVID-19 put a halt to their Bowl For Kids' Sake events which kicked off in February of 2020 and were slated to take place in the community through March of the same year..

Not only will this be an opportunity to raise much-needed funds for the organization, but it is also one that is aimed to raise awareness of the fact BBBSY is much more than just mentoring programs.

?This is our fifty-first year in York Region and I do find there is a misconception with BBBSY in general and within York Region: a lot of people do know us from the one-to-one community match, they meet once a week, but we want to bring awareness to the fact we have programs thriving within the community, especially our group programs. Our group programs are the number one services we do provide, whether it is Go Girls, Game On, or in-school mentoring.

?They are thriving in schools and community centres and that is really where we need a lot of volunteers as well. We're really excited to open up to more minds that we're not just the community one-to-one anymore.?

For more information on Big Brothers Big Sisters of York, their various programs, and how you can volunteer to provide mentorship to a local youth in need, visit bbbsy.ca.

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