

Big Brothers Big Sisters looks for 50 ways to make a difference on Golden Anniversary

Fifty new donors, fifty new sponsors, fifty new groups engaged in what they do ? as they embark on their fiftieth anniversary year, Big Brothers Big Sisters of York is looking for fifty ways to make a difference.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of York, which is celebrating its Golden Anniversary in 2020, is encouraging people to get involved and, to borrow their theme for the year, help them ?Go for the Gold.?

Ahead of their milestone, Big Brothers Big Sisters launched their renewed mission to ?enable life-changing mentoring relationships and to ignite the power and potential of young people.?

It is a simple yet bold statement, but one that requires a buy-in from the community to make it a reality, and the first opportunity the public can show their support this year is by dusting off their bowling shoes for Bowl for Kids' Sake, presented by A&B Courier, which is set to launch this March with the first Bowl event taking place on Saturday, March 7 in Richmond Hill.

With further dates set in Bradford on Sunday, March 8 and Newmarket on Saturday, March 28, it is one of Big Brothers Big Sisters of York's (BBBSY) biggest annual fundraisers, but one which has taken a financial hit in recent years due to dwindling numbers of bowling alleys.

?People sometimes forget how fun bowling is,? says BBBSY Executive Director Sarah Dame. ?Not too long ago, Bowl for Kids' Sake used to raise over \$200,000, but now it is closer to \$60,000. We've lost a lot of bowling alleys, we understand that, and we understand there are just so many amazing causes to support ? and we want to support them all ? but we know that without this kind of mentorship program in York Region there would be some significant losses to the community.?

In the lead up to March, BBBSY is issuing a challenge for businesses and groups to come forward and field teams, as well as take on the mantle of being community ambassadors to challenge others, to make this year's Bowl for Kids' Sake series a huge success.

?We're going hard,? says Suzanne Boucher, Fundraising and Events Coordinator for BBBSY. ?Our theme this year is Go for the Gold and we're going to ask people to dress up for a fun event. This year will be even bigger with more prizes, bigger raffle items, and we're really going to go out in the community to push the message that this is our anniversary year and we're looking for a lot more support. At all of our events, we're trying to show how critical these mentoring relationships are. They are not just these fun friendships that people picture, but they are critical relationships. We want

everyone to understand what they are supporting, how critical it is, and how much them coming out to bowl on a weekend is helping these relationships grow, especially for young people who are experiencing adversity.

In addition to Bowl for Kids' Sake, BBBSY will be taking this message to the links, spearheading Golf For Kids' Sake golf tournament, set for Thursday, March 21, at King's Riding Golf Course.

A returning favourite, this is an event currently looking for a sponsor ? and, in this need, is an opportunity, says Ms. Dame.

?We are seeking a really innovative sponsorship for Golf for Kids Sake who wants to be a big part of this and can really help drive some of the fundraising behind this,? she says. ?If we have volunteers and dollars, we can run programming, but volunteers are getting harder, so we need to be really intentional about how we can recruit, how we can bring mentors in and how we educate them too about the difference they are making. We are quite a bit smaller as an organization than we were a year ago, but we're still serving 500 children in the community. The team did an amazing job in 2019, but we are a smaller agency for sure.

?We want to get donors involved as opposed to funders. We think our community members who are our donors need to really get engaged and feel part of building a strong community and not be afraid to get involved.?

How you become involved is, essentially up to you. In addition to Bowl for Kids' Sake and Golf for Kids' Sake, BBBSY welcomes any individual or group who has an idea for a third-party fundraiser. Ms. Boucher says it can be anything from a family backyard barbecue to a yard sale.

?Anyone can reach out,? says Ms. Boucher, noting BBBSY provides an online kit for anyone with a third-party fundraising idea. ?We would love to be a part of it.?

Adds Ms. Dame: ?It would be nice to have 50 third-party fundraisers, fifty new sponsors, fifty new donors. Let's be honest, we have a smaller budget, but we want to be more sustainable. We want to be here. We want our programming here in York Region and we need our community to be behind that and support that. We're trying to be innovative; we're trying to be bolder, and we want to be bigger. I think that, together, we are.?

For more on Big Brothers Big Sisters of York, visit york.bigbrothersbigsisters.ca.

By Brock Weir