

There's a lot of power in an hour, says Big Brothers Big Sisters



By Brock Weir

How much can you do in a spare hour?

Maybe you can cook or eat dinner. You might be able to wash the dishes or do a few loads of laundry. Then again, you could just sit around and make a small dent in your Netflix queue. But how much of that has a lasting impact on the world around you?

According to Big Brothers Big Sisters of York, there is quite a bit of 'power' in an hour if you use it the right way.

Power of an Hour is the in-school mentoring program hosted by Big Brothers Big Sisters of York (BBBSY) held during the academic year that partners mentors with students who need them most.

The In-School Mentoring Program matches elementary school girls and boys with caring adult mentors. Matches meet during school hours and on school property to share in fun activities like board games, sports, arts and crafts, and even baking.

The program is seasonal, meaning that they only meet during the academic year, but this single hour each week pays significant dividends.

'We just want to find people who really want to do this,' says Katie Lowes of BBBSY.

The Power of an Hour is just one of many programs offered by Big Brothers Big Sisters of York. Outside of the in-school program, BBBSY matches youth with adult mentors across York Region. In the more mainstream programs offered by BBBSY, the time commitment is just an hour or two each week. All that's asked for is a one-year commitment to the program.

An hour, a week, a month, it all adds up and pays significant dividends not only for the mentor and mentee, but also the wider community.

'There are a lot of different ways people can volunteer in their community, and they are all valuable and important, but we're looking for people who understand the impact they can have in an hour or two each week and really want to be committed to that child in the process,' Ms. Lowes continues. 'We're looking for people who really just want to make a difference. It's not about changing a child's life every week, it is just about the small things, about spending time with a child, showing them they are important and what they say is valuable and important to somebody else.'

It might be about the small things, but there's a big payoff.

According to recent data compiled by the organization, 93 per cent of the kids enrolled in Big Brothers Big Sisters programs have expressed an increase in community engagement as a direct result of their participation. In turn, 90 per cent of the mentors surveyed over the last six months have reported having a better understanding of issues and barriers impacting children and youth across York Region as well.

'That, to be me, is unbelievable and speaks volumes,' says Ms. Lowes. 'If we had 90 per cent of the kids in York Region feeling understood, even by one person, how impactful would that be for them? We are looking at the next generation of civic-minded adults. We're trying to get these kids aware and engaged in their community from a young age and find out all of the amazing resources that are available. Not every mom, dad or guardian has time to be able to provide that information to a child, or they may not know it themselves.'

Adds Sarah Dame, Executive Director for BBBSY: "What we're doing in our communities isn't just this nice friendship piece in terms of mentoring, we're trying to play a very systemic role in empowering children in our community who are at risk, that allows them to become more engaged in their communities, and when they are engaged in their communities they are more successful moving forward and more apt to stay in school and head down the right path when they have an adult mentor that is there to provide them that role model and friendship, too.

"It is not just a nice to have, it is an essential service and we have so many kids now who are at risk."

Some kids, however, will have a while to wait before they can be set on this path. As is the case each year, Big Brothers Big Sisters of York is grappling with significant wait lists. The length of the wait lists vary from municipality to municipality, but all of York Region's nine towns and cities are in similar predicaments.

Proceeds from September's Magna Hoedown are expected to have a positive impact in helping get kids off waiting lists and paired up with a mentor, but demand is growing along with the community and the volunteer base is not exactly following suit.

"Our volunteers can't quite keep up, so getting this kind of support from Hoedown and the amazing folks of Magna allows us to stretch our resources a little bit further and provide better training to our mentors and volunteers, and be able to provide some additional support to our families, even outside of the mentoring aspect," says Ms. Lowes.

Adds Ms. Dame: "We're not asking our mentors to spend money. We understand that they do and we're certainly not discouraging, but it is not about taking them to a ballgame or a movie every time, it is as precious as just hanging out for a couple of hours and having someone who actually listens and helps guide a little bit when they are struggling."

For more information on how to become involved, as well as how to support the organization through your purchase of Hoedown tickets, visit www.bbbsy.ca.