

York marks Big Brothers Big Sisters? 100th anniversary



By Brock Weir

Big Brothers Big Sisters of York is about more than just mentoring and providing an ear and some guidance for today's youth ? it is also about building healthy minds and healthy bodies.

For Sarah Dame, Executive Director of Big Brothers Big Sisters of York (BBBSY), a little extra money will go a very long way in shaping the lives of local boys and girls, building healthy minds and bodies and providing much needed boosts in self-esteem and confidence.

The BBBSY community, which celebrates its 100th anniversary in Canada this year, is coming up with their game plan over the next couple of weeks to move the multitude of event and raffle tickets assigned to them as partners in this year's Wild, Wild West Hoedown, hosted by Magna International. The group, as one of 25 selected charities and community organizations this year, will get an equal share of all proceeds derived from one of York Region's largest annual parties.

This money, says Ms. Dame, will provide an always welcome jolt into their in-school programs Game On, which helps boys and young men ?eat smart, play smart and live smart?, and Go Girl!, focusing on giving girls and young women some guidance on ?physical activity, balanced eating and self-esteem.?

?One of the hardest things for us is funding some of the programs we currently have in play,? says Ms. Dame. ?We're looking to hoedown to continue their support in areas that have been most impactful for us. This year, because of Hoedown's 25th anniversary, we wanted to continue to share those proceeds between our traditional matching program, which is our most costly part of the program, and the expansion of Go Girls and Game On in a number of new schools. That's what allows us to reach more children and more schools, and fight.?

According to BBBSY, young men often struggle with body issues. The Game On program creates a dialogue to ?discuss current and pressing issues facing boys and young men, builds an appreciation for the benefits of healthy eating habits, promotes physical exercise through the use of non-traditional activities, instills respect for socio-economic, ethno-cultural and racial diversity, and encourages leadership skills and independent thinking.?

Go Girls!, on the other hand, also focuses on physical activity, balanced eating and self-esteem, but also supports the ?development of leadership and life skills, offers guidance in establishing and maintaining friendships, and promotes the importance of positive mental activity and regular physical exercise.?

Ms. Dame says being selected by Magna this year as one of the beneficiary organizations was not only a sign their application hit all

the right marks, but also a renewed and continued vote of confidence in the services they provide within the York Region community.

?I often think Magna is doing so many incredible things in terms of the dollars they provide to the community, I am not sure we have done as much as we can to say thank you,? says Ms. Dane. ?It's tough ? we don't have a building we can put something up front to acknowledge [supporters] but we're intending to have our first donor wall this fall.

?One of the things I am learning is [Magna founder Frank] Stronach was instrumental in this agency moving forward a full-time agency in York Region. He was a Big Brother, and we're honouring him at our gala this November. He has been an incredible supporter of this agency and Hoedown have often been a great source of support for us. We will be honouring him [for] his friendship and guidance. He really believes in the mentoring process.?

In this milestone year, BBBSY is also focusing on increasing their volunteer base. The bulk of their programs are indeed volunteer driven and there are currently very close to 100 kids on the waiting list for a mentor, says Ms. Dame. In order to get them off that list, volunteers are essential.

They are more and more looking towards student placements from Seneca College and Humber college to get programs out into schools and into sites that are in need, and, eventually engage continuing volunteers.

?It's a big commitment we're asking for,? she says. ?When you're a Big Brother or a Big Sister, it's not just an hour or two once a year at an event.?

For more information on BBBSY, visit www.bbbsy.ca.

This is the first installment of The Auroran's annual focus on organizations participating in this year's Hoedown. Our next installment will centre on the efforts of both Yellow Brick House and the Women's Centre of York Region to help make their clients, and area women, more money smart and financially stable.