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HELPING A BOY TO HELP HIMSELF

By **WILMA BLOKHUIS** / Special to *The Champion*

YOU'VE PROBABLY SEEN the commercial of a man and boy sitting up in a tree because the boy is afraid of talking to girls; and another one of a man and boy building themselves a 'time traveler' in an open field.

The man and boy are a 'Big' and a 'Little.' The two television commercials are part of a major Ontario-wide media campaign by the Big Brothers of Ontario to raise the agency's profile and recruit more men.

The campaign, 'Be a Big Brother — It's Kids Stuff,' is funded by a \$450,000 grant from the Trillium Foundation. In addition to the two television commercials are four radio spots, newspaper advertising, brochures and posters, explains Evelyn Gransauil, executive director of the Big Brothers of Halton. Smaller agencies like hers also received a kit of 100 promotional posters.

The Halton organization serves the Milton area.

"The marketing campaign was developed following extensive research into "the root causes of why men are not inquiring about becoming Big Brothers as frequently in the past," she said. The campaign was launched at the end of last year.

"The first day the television ads ran (on Dec. 30), there were 16 calls to the 1-800 number," said Ms Gransauil, "and we got one more Big Brother volunteer (for the Oakville area)."

Perception of role flawed

Ms Gransauil believes recruitment of volunteers is either stagnating or declining because of an "incorrect perception of the role of a Big Brother in society." People fear having to be a 'father figure,' or spending time with a 'troubled' boy. Potential volunteers also worry the work is emotionally draining, requires a fixed weekly time, and that they will be responsible for how the boy turns out.

These misconceptions, the economic uncertainty hitting the 18 to 25-year group hardest, plus increased competition from other charities and agencies seeking volunteers, has resulted in a shortage of Big Brothers.

The campaign promotes the role of a Big Brother as being a friend, not a 'father figure,' who spends time with a boy who has similar interests, not a 'troubled' child. The time commitment is shorter, with an emphasis on having fun, being flexible and supportive.

To recruit more Big Brothers, the local agencies will be encouraged to go beyond the 18 to 25-year-olds who are struggling to make it in a tough economy, to continue tapping into the 25 to 35-year-old age group and consider matches with men over 45.

Having one major media campaign for all the province's 63 Big Brother agencies "gives each agency the opportunity to benefit from the same message" regardless of size, Ms Gransauil explains. The television campaign runs to the end of February, and then resumes in September.

Larger agencies like the Big Brothers of Toronto have produced additional advertising materials to compliment the Ontario-wide campaign, whereas smaller agencies like Halton's can't afford it. However, the Big Brothers of Halton will be able to use its poster kit to continue the campaign locally.

"We moved to cut our costs so we don't have to cut our programs. This way we do something for at least half of the boys on the waiting list."

**EVELYN GRANSAUIL
BIG BROTHERS OF HALTON**

Costs have been cut

"We moved to cut our costs so we don't have to cut our programs," notes Ms Gransauil. "This way we do something for at least half of the boys on the waiting list. Activities can be anything from skating to crafts.

"We also want to start an after school program running about twice a week from 3 to 5 p.m., where high school students, on placement with us, can give some tutoring or work on computers," said Ms Gransauil, adding the agency has received two laptops from SmithKline Beecham, and can spare a third computer and printer for this new program to start in late February or early March.

There are also plans for some other new programs including Promise Scholarships for boys who keep their promise to complete high school and go on to post-secondary education.



"We have to change our programs to meet the needs of our changing society," explains Ms Gransauil. "But our bottom line is still the same, to provide a valuable service to boys (from father-absent homes)"

Currently, there are about 75 'Big' and 'Little' matches in Halton, and about 40 to 45 boys on the waiting list. Some boys wait up to two years before they are matched with a Big Brother. Most matches run two to three years, however "some of our board members have matches running six and seven years," said Ms Gransauil. Little Brothers are aged 6 to 16 — however, the formal relationship through the agency can continue until age 18 if needed. Sometimes, lifelong friendships develop.

"Our Big Brother matches are solid, good consistent matches," says Ms Gransauil. "Our Big Brothers are fun, role models, offer guidance, and give friendship."

Big Brothers are scattered across Ontario for 80 years — 31 in Halton. According to statistics, over 80 per cent of Little Brothers obtain their secondary school diploma, exceed the national averages for graduation from post-secondary education, have higher self-esteem, tend to respect authority, and have a strong sense of right and wrong.

Across Ontario, there are more than 4,000 Little Brothers and Little Sisters waiting for matches — in some areas of Canada, Big Brother and Big Sister organizations have amalgamated to form one agency, under the umbrella, Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Canada. Across the country, there are some 400,000 boys living in father-absent homes.

For more information about Big Brothers in Halton Region, please phone 339-2355. The office is at 446 Reynolds Avenue in Oakville, and serves the Milton area as well.



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