


[Click to Print](#)

Thursday, February 10, 2011

Big Brothers and Sisters wanted

UIS students help out, but there's still a volunteer gap

BY HOLLY DILLEMUTH



Yvonne Wapniarski says it takes her an average of two years to match a child with an adult mentor through Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Illinois Capital Region in Springfield.

"Two years unless they match right up," she says. "If I don't match them in two years, I'm supposed to take them off the list."

Wapniarski is the enrollment specialist for mentors who are called Big Brothers and Big Sisters, and who volunteer their lunch hour to spend quality time with a child. The regional nonprofit office serves Sangamon, Christian, Logan, Macoupin and Montgomery Counties.

The challenge for Wapniarski and the agency is to find adults who fit the preferences of children and their parents, as well as volunteer qualifications. Wapniarski says that nearly 80 percent of children waiting for a mentor in Sangamon County are African-American and many are young boys who would like an African-American Big Brother. She rarely gets African-American candidates for volunteers until Anthony Thomas-Davis, adviser for the Black Male Collegiate Society at University of Illinois Springfield, contacted her last summer.

Wapniarski told Thomas-Davis, "I was struggling to find African-American male mentors."

Now 15 volunteers from the Black Male Collegiate Society at UIS have partnered as Big Brothers with children at Matheny-Withrow Elementary in Springfield. The group has met with children during their lunch on Fridays since Jan. 14.

Thomas-Davis, 24, lost both his mother and father as an infant and can relate to children who had a rough upbringing. He says that his Little Brother is "Like me in more ways than one."

Mentors and children play board games, finish homework or talk about sports.

Black Male Collegiate Society president Justin Rose builds Legos, plays dominoes and talks about his Little Brother's favorite sport, basketball. Rose, 21, reminds the 11-year-old that, "You have to be a student first – playing sports is a privilege."

"It gives you something to feel good about," Rose says. "Not just for you – for that child. It's just going to get better," he says. "I'm already attached to my Little Brother and it's still early."

Rose grew up in a rough neighborhood outside of Chicago and is thankful to this day for mentors who took him "under their wing." Big Brothers Big Sisters aims to do just that through community and site-based programs.

There are currently 80 more children in Sangamon County who need an adult mentor. Parents and teachers can refer children to the program through the agency. Many children referred are from single-parent homes but others have two parents. All need someone outside of their immediate family who can introduce them to new ideas and new activities that they might not otherwise have, Wapniarski says.

The nonprofit expects 22 more children in Sangamon County to be added to the program by Feb. 10, which means even more help is needed.

Chris Hembrough, executive director of Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Illinois Capital Region, emphasizes the constant need for more mentors, both male and female.

"We long for the day we have a waiting list of volunteers," he says.

Each Big Brother and Big Sister is paired with a case manager for guidance through the mentoring process and must be 18 years of age. Mentors must also pass an interview, background check and possess a valid driver's license.

"Most folks find that it's not that difficult of a task," he says. "If you have a heart and an hour a week, you can make a difference in the life of a child," he says.

Find out more by contacting Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Illinois Capital Region at 217-753-1216 or visit the website at www.bbbscapitalregion.org.

RELATED CONTENT

[Plugging leaks in MacArthur's market](#)
[Vernon Harrington and the Atomic Blues Band](#)
[Remember to not forget](#)
[Group wants local rail jobs](#)
[Cheap house on the prairie](#)

RELATED TO:

[Yvonne Wapniarski](#) [Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Illinois Capital Region](#) [Springfield](#) [Sangamon County](#) [Christian County](#) [Logan County](#) [Macoupin County](#) [Montgomery County](#) [Anthony Thomas-Davis](#) [Justin Rose](#) [Chris Hembrough](#) [Black Male Collegiate Society](#)