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University of Dayton

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NEWS



Tuesday December 2, 2014

Little Start, Big Impact

From a "little" start, the University of Dayton's Big Brothers Big Sisters program has grown into something "big" for University students and Dayton-area children.

"It has been incredible to see the growth of this program at UD," said Jason Hayes, president of the club. "This year, we took in our largest freshman class and had the best retention rate for returning

'Bigs' that the club has ever seen."

When Hayes joined the program in 2011, only about 15 students were active "Bigs." Today, more than 90 University students are mentoring 90 Dayton-area children each week to help them develop confidence, improve academically and build better futures.

In 2013, the University club became an official partner of Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Greater Miami Valley, though their connection goes back more than 30 years when the club was founded. With support from this partnership, the club significantly expanded its mentoring program at St. Paul's United Methodist Church and also established school-based mentoring programs at River's Edge Montessori and Kiser Elementary.

"Our partnership has grown so much that we have enough 'Bigs' for every child at St. Paul's. It just goes to show the commitment of the University of Dayton and its students in getting our 'Littles' on the path to life-long success," said Joe Radelet, CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Greater Miami Valley.

The "Bigs" help "Littles" with homework, play games, do crafts and activities, and ultimately serve as role models and consistent friends to children who may not have such a person in their life otherwise.

"More and more kids are asking when they can get a 'Big.' They hear from their peers how much they enjoy it," said Paige Morrison, head of the mentoring programs for the club.

Some children have made significant progress both academically and socially through the involvement of their "Big." Delfina, 7, came to the United States a year ago from Tijuana, Mexico. Her "Big", Libby Durnwald, a senior studying International Studies and Spanish, is fluent in Spanish and helps Delfina learn English.

"Since meeting Delfina, she has really opened up and is very talkative one-on-one when she used to be so shy — now I know that she is secretly really funny! She has also improved a lot in her reading," Durnwald said.

Delfina, with the help of Durnwald translating, said her favorite activity is painting and crafting with her "Big."

Another match from the UD program is Katy Hoeper and "Little Brother" Dylan. When Hoeper, a University sophomore, met Dylan in February he was very quiet and reserved.

"Now, he has so much more confidence. You can just see it. And he is really interested in his classes now," Hoeper said.

Dylan lit up when talking about his favorite subject at school: science. He is excited to participate in his school's upcoming science fair. When asked what he likes most about having a "Big," Dylan answered, "I just love that I get to hang out with her."

University students who enter the program remain a mentor for at least a year, but often stay longer.

"Students join for different reasons, but they stay because of the impact their 'Littles' have on them. I initially joined because I missed my siblings when I came to UD and wanted to get involved in a service club," Hayes said. "I stayed because of the relationships I've built with the kids at St. Paul's."

Hayes said many of the kids have a tough family life, and it's clear how much it means to them to have a "Big" as a friend.

"I almost feel like some of them are my actual little siblings instead of just my 'Littles.' I've been blessed to watch them grow up these past three and a half years."

The program is gearing up for more growth. Hayes said a program specifically for Spanish-speaking children is in the works to open this year.

For more information on Big Brothers Big Sisters, visit <http://www.bbbsgmv.org> or contact Matt McDowell at 937-220-6855 or MMcDowell@bbbsgmv.org. For interviews, contact Chelsea Randall at randallc4@udayton.edu or 937-760-2825.