

Today's Family

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Fun has no age limit for Big Brothers

By Deanna R. Adams
Today's Family Writer

It's easy to find reasons not to be a Big Brother. Time, commitment, involvement. After all, don't we all have enough to do in our lives?

Steve Schmidtke sees being a part of the Big Brothers Big Sister Program differently. "I have so much fun with Gregory," he says. "You get to relive your childhood in a way. He and I have so much in common, especially related to sports. So we go to a lot of games."

Recently, Big Brother Steve and Little Brother Gregory attended both a Cavs game and a Captains game. "We won the Cavs game," Gregory says, "but the Captains lost."

Whether their team wins or loses, it doesn't much matter to these brothers. "We have a lot of fun together," says Gregory, 11, of Newbury. Seems the word "fun" is another common element between these two. And that's just one of the reasons why Steve stresses that more men—if they knew about it—would jump at the chance to get involved in the program.

Big Brother Big Sisters is a youth mentoring organization that provides children with a positive role model, while offering a friendship that, in many cases, lasts a lifetime. And contrary to what some might think, being a "Big" doesn't require a lot of time or money. Activities can include the simple things in life, such as visiting a park, playing a board game, taking walks or bike rides, shooting hoops, or sharing a pizza.

Steve and Gregory do all of that and more. "We go golfing, hiking, bowling, play video games, go to the movies, and he even helps me with homework,"

Gregory says, adding that they also love the same soda—Mountain Dew.

"I always wanted a kid in my life," says Steve, who is single and lives in Bainbridge. "I actually started thinking about Big Brothers several years ago, but I traveled extensively then, so was unable to do it. When I changed jobs, I immediately reached out to Big Brothers in Painesville and spoke to Michelle Stalnaker, who got the process started."

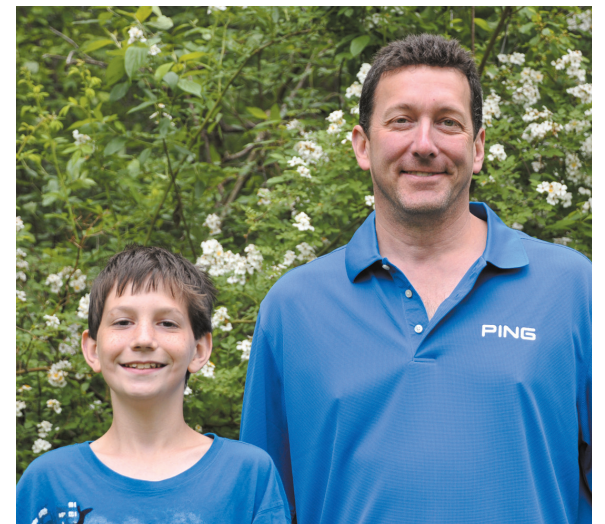
Steve adds that the first meeting went smoothly, thanks to the way the organization handles it. "Big Brothers do a real nice job at that. They provide a list of questions to ask each other, kind of a little interview between the Big and the Little. That helped us feel more comfortable right away. And once he and I met, well, it was a no brainer after that."

Gregory's mom, Ann, agrees with that assessment. "He and Steve are two peas in a pod. I love watching those two play video games together. Steve's just a big kid himself. His personality is perfect for Gregory."

Matching up the right personalities is an integral part of the agency's mission. Big Brother Big Sister matches are made based on common interests between the adult and child, and the goal is always on building friendships.

Finding a good match is in addition to finding enough volunteers. Lynne Strah, director of Marketing & Communications, says they are especially in need of good men to fill the Big Brother roles. In fact, Ann's daughter, Amy, received a Big Sister before Gregory got his Big. "I had to explain to Greg that it's just harder to find enough men for all the young boys," Ann recalls.

"I encourage other men, if they have the opportuni-



Big Brother Steve Schmidtke and his Little Brother Gregory

ty, to just do it," Steve says. "I think some people are afraid of the time commitment, but you can be flexible, as long as you're consistent. And until you get involved, you don't realize how rewarding it is, or the hugely significant effect you can have on a young person's life by helping their self-esteem and guiding them in the right direction. It's been a real positive, interesting journey for me, and extremely fulfilling."

When asked what's the best thing about having a Big Brother, Gregory didn't hesitate. "The best part about having Steve is I can rely on him to help me with my homework, or, if I don't have anything to do, I can call him and we just talk and stuff."

To be a Big Brother or Big Sister, contact:

Big Brothers Big Sisters
Painesville Administrative Office
8 North State Street, Suite 360
Painesville, Ohio 44077
Phone: 440-352-2526
Website: www.bbbsneo.org

