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SERVING NEIGHBORHOODS IN SOUTH SPOKANE AND THE WEST PLAINS



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Radersburg Nine survivor buried in Spokane

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Clothing bank volunteers serve needy residents

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Mentors make a 'Big' impact

Adam Johnson, 25, had a mentor for about six years through Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Inland Northwest.



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Volunteers, funds needed for work with at-risk kids

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When Adam Johnson was 10, he was building a plane in his mother's Coeur d'Alene backyard. The plane featured lawn mower wheels, a cockpit made out of a sink and various boards used as wings. It never made it off the ground, but that didn't matter much.

"As a kid I had big dreams, and when I got a Big Brother I could always talk to him about them," said Johnson, who's now 25, and the CEO and president of Convertec, a Coeur d'Alene-based independent telecommunications company.

Johnson's Big Brother was Don Andrews, who had a real plane and often took his Little Brother flying.

"And I was like, wow, that's huge," Johnson said. "But the best was that I never heard a

discouraging word from Don."

January is national mentoring month and Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Inland Northwest is hoping that will bring in some more volunteers and desperately needed funding.

"We are sending out a call to action," said Melissa Perea, fundraising events coordinator for Big Brothers Big Sisters.

In a letter sent to volunteers and friends of Big Brothers Big

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BIG BROTHERS

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Sisters, CEO Darin Christensen writes that the organization currently can't make any new matches, and will likely serve 30 percent fewer children in 2010, because of "significant financial shortfalls this year."

Big Brothers Big Sisters pair an at-risk child with an adult mentor to help the child reach full potential, through a strong one-to-one relationship.

Jessica Leach, 25, has been a Big Sister – or a 'Big,' as the mentors are called – to Haili Johnson, 12, for about three and a half years.

"My best friend was a Big Sister, so I heard about it from her," said Leach, who's the 2009 Big Sister of the Year. "I called in and set up an appointment, and I just got started on it."

The matching process is simple: after appropriate background checks and a home visit at the potential Big's house, the Big is introduced to three matches via a match person who knows the children.

"They ask what you like to do in your spare time, so they find a good match for you," said Leach, who's a financial service representative at Spokane Teachers Credit Union. "They want to make sure you don't clash with someone – like if you are a homebody and your match is from a very active family; that may not work out."

Going to meet Haili for the first time was a little nerve-racking, said Leach, but the initial jitters soon passed and the two went out for ice cream.

"Haili was 8 at the time and she was very outgoing and the family was very nice," said Leach.

Today, they go to movies, play Guitar Hero and carve pumpkins – they've even gone to a Mariners game

together. Leach said Big Brothers Big Sisters also offers a lot of free activities, like sailing and other excursions.

There is one thing Leach would like potential Bigs to know:

"You don't have to be 'on' all the time. People over think it. All you have to do is be yourself and be there for your Little."

For now, Leach is happily matched up but when her Little moves on – many matches end in teenage years, when school and work commitments take up more time, than in younger years – she'll be happy to match up with another child.

"It's just a great program, I don't think people understand what a great impact it has on not just the kid, but on you," said Leach.

Adam Johnson had a tight-knit relationship with his Big from the time he was 10 until he was around 16.

"It really forged my character. Don taught me that nothing is impossible," said Johnson. "And it was great to have someone listen – even to my totally crazy dreams. He always said, 'never let anyone tell you that you can't do it.'"

The two drifted apart when Johnson was around 16, because he was going to school and working full time. Years later, Johnson has had chance meetings with his old mentor at a local coffee shop.

Growing up with a single mom, Johnson said he didn't have a real father figure in his life so his Big Brother filled a huge void.

"I think I waited for three years for my match," he said. "That's why it's so important that people volunteer for this program."

Would he volunteer to become a Big Brother?

"Absolutely, but time is a constraint right now," he said, "so it will be later on in my life."