

northwest

Be a Big

Mentoring opportunities exist for sexual minorities

by Jaymee R. Cuti

Sexual minorities are at no loss for opportunities to contribute to the queer community. Through fund-raisers and galas, workplace giving programs and campaign opportunities, those with a calling to contribute can do so with time, dollars or both.

But another opportunity to make a difference doesn't frequently occur to queer singles and couples: mentoring a young person.

"I doubt many GLBT people are aware of many ways they could help youth.... Volunteering for an organization is a broad way. Another is to get involved with a specific kid," said Mark Clift, an accountant who sometimes works with domestic partnership issues.

Clift and his partner, Jeff Knapp, have been enriching the lives of young people since their first exchange student came to stay with them three years ago.

"You really give these kids a piece of your heart. They're part of your life," said Clift. "We had to start acting more like a family. We had to get home and get dinner on the table and start playing soccer dads."

Since then, Clift and Knapp have had three exchange students, all male, from Germany. Clift says that the students have been respectful of his sexuality and that he has cleared up some cultural misconceptions.

"They think all we eat is junk food. They think everyone is religious," he said. "Germany is not a very churchgoing country, so they were all very relieved. Compared to U.S. culture, they are so much more accepting."

Clift and Knapp take their jobs as host families seriously by introducing students to what they see as the best of the Northwest.

"We've gone to Vancouver, B.C., Seattle, down the Oregon coast, down to the redwoods, Crater Lake, hikes at the Gorge. We try to show them Oregon and the Pacific Northwest because they're only here for 10 months, and this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience for them."

Clift is also a big brother to a child through Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metropolitan Portland, an organization that is welcoming to sexual minorities. He serves as treasurer of the board.

Big Brothers Big Sisters has many programs



Susan Baumgardner of Big Brothers Big Sisters shoots hoops with her grandson, Sage Reeves.

including school-based partnerships, where "bigs" meet their "littles" for lunchtime and recess, and community-based programs that require bigs to spend 10 hours a month with their littles. Littles are between the ages of 6 and 16 and are generally at-risk kids. The need for volunteers is greatest outside the Portland-metro area, particularly in east Multnomah County and Hillsboro.

"Their world does not include things others of us take for granted," said Clift.

He has brought his little brother on a number of adventures such as cutting down a Christmas tree, visiting Portland Art Museum and participating in Cascade AIDS Project's AIDSWalk.

"I know we're providing experience and friendship and a positive message he would otherwise be lacking," said Clift. "We follow through on that commitment."

Susan Baumgardner, a lesbian who works as

partnership development director for Big Brothers Big Sisters, says the organization has been reaching out to queers to let them know many families would accept them as big brothers or sisters to their children. "We're reaching out to groups at different companies that have diversity networks."

Big Brothers Big Sisters has a presence at Pride Northwest and Equity Foundation events and employs several sexual minorities.

Families must approve of their child being paired with a queer person, though Baumgardner says the organization's screening system makes most participants feel secure.

Big Brother Big Sisters' background check includes a Department of Motor Vehicles record check, which is more stringent than that of a school volunteer. "I think that makes people feel more at ease that we do such a thorough screening for the good of the person," Baumgardner said.

She says spending time with her little sister is a mutually beneficial experience.

"It gives me a lot of satisfaction that I get to hang out with someone 12 years old. I learn about that generation, and she learns about my generation," said Baumgardner. "We take turns on the radio."

Baumgardner and her little sister stay active. They have gone bowling and swimming and shot hoops. Baumgardner also attended a singing recital at her little sister's school.

Clift describes a great need for volunteers at Big Brothers Big Sisters. He cites a long list of kids waiting to be matched with mentors.

"We have kids in our own back yard that could benefit from your attention," said Clift. 10

For more information on BIG BROTHERS BIG SISTERS OF METROPOLITAN PORTLAND visit www.bbbsportland.org.



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