

Volunteer mentors make a BIG difference

When members of Brandon's Big Brothers Big Sisters created a 'Haunted House' for the first time, as one of their 2006 fund raising events, they had no idea how the public would respond.

"I saw a similar event staged in the town of Russell and thought it would be a good way to involve the older kids in our organization in a fund raising activity," says executive director, Carla Black. "We invited those who were twelve years and older to participate and got an excellent response."

Businessman Rod Ficek owned a suitable building and generously donated space in which to create the haunted house; the youth came with ideas and a willingness to work hard. And their efforts were rewarded.

"We were shocked and pleased at how many people turned out," Carla says. "We've also had requests to hold it again next year."

It's not surprising the event was a success. The 'Haunted House' like all of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Brandon fundraisers was a fun event. Carla and associate director, Cathy Slezak, bring a caring, positive approach to the agency which relies heavily on volunteer support for the mentoring programs it offers to children in single parent families.

"Our volunteers come from all walks of life but have the common goal of wanting to help a child," Cathy says. "It's easy to get involved. You don't have to change your life, just make a bit of room for a new friend."

Research shows that children mentored by Big Brothers Big Sisters volunteers achieve improved self-esteem, more self-confidence, better family and peer relationships and increased academic achievement.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada is a national organization initiated in 1913 and formally chartered in 1964. There are 150 member agencies serving 1000 communities across the country, each with their own Board of Directors and specific community activities and objectives.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Brandon, originally founded in 1972 as Big Brothers, is an incorporated charitable agency governed by a board of nine directors.

Carla has been with the agency since 1996 and is now seeing adults who were mentored as children coming back to volunteer. "They appreciate what our programs did for them and now want to help others," she says.

The agency offers a variety of programs for 'Bigs' (Big Brothers and Sisters) and 'Little's' (Little Brothers and Sisters).



L-R: Carla Black and Cathy Slezack in costume at the very successful Big Brothers Big Sisters 2006 Halloween Haunted House fundraising event.



All programs are monitored by staff. "We try our best to match Bigs and Littles who have common interests," Cathy says.

- Big Brothers matches a male volunteer with a male youth while Big Sisters matches a female volunteer with a female or male youth. The Couples for Kids program matches a couple with a male or female child.

- Mini Bunch is a group mentoring program designed for children on the waiting list. Two volunteers organize activities for four to five children.

- Digital Heroes has been set up for older youth and volunteers who have half an hour to an hour a week and access to email. In this program the Big and Little "meet" through email.

- The In-School Mentoring program matches an adult volunteer with a child, in a school environment. The Mentors and Mentees meet for one hour a week during school hours where they can play games, make crafts or simply talk.

The program is offered to the elementary and middle schools in Brandon School Division, as well as selected schools in Neepawa, Minnedosa and Carberry.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Brandon operates with the help of grants, such as the provincial government's Healthy Child in School, and recently became a United Way agency.

Fundraising events also contribute to the overall operating budget. "Bowl for Kids Sake is our biggest fundraising campaign of the year," Carla says. "In 2006, we raised \$38,000 through the combined efforts of individual donors and corporate sponsorship." The 2007 event will be held at Thunderbird Bowl on March 18.

Two more annual events are held in September: Pass the Pie – those who are targeted to be pied by a 'well wisher' have the option of paying to send the whipped cream pie on to someone else. Serving Up Smiles – restaurant servers sell 'smiles' to their customers. The Agency was able to host a golf tournament in June 2006 thanks to the sponsorship of Len's RV.

For more information, call 727-1787.

Volunteering offers many benefits in appreciation for the gift of your time and expertise.

Volunteering can help you: make important networking contacts • learn or develop skills • gain work experience • build self-esteem and self-confidence • improve health • meet new people • feel needed and valued • make a difference in someone's life • express gratitude for help you may have received in the past from an organization



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