



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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BIG BROTHERS BIG SISTERS EXPANDING IN FAYETTE COUNTY

Uniontown, PA – Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Laurel Region needs volunteers for its new initiative kicking off in Fayette County.

Founded in 1975 in neighboring Westmoreland County, Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Laurel Region (BBBSLR) is an evidence-based nonprofit that aims to help all youth achieve their full potential by matching children facing adversity (“Littles”) with adult volunteer mentors (“Bigs”). The agency currently operates out of Greensburg and originally expanded its coverage to include Fayette County in 2001.

“However, there was never staff in Fayette for any consistent period of time, so the county wasn’t served properly,” BBBSLR Program Manager Aubrey Marquis said. “We never received grants for Fayette until this year.”

Marquis said BBBSLR Executive Director Stephanie Babich Mihleder took over in late 2019, officially marking the start of a “new generation of people running the program.” A brand new team of seven - including Mihleder, Marquis and Community Relations and Mentoring Coordinator Brittany Cooley - made their primary goal expansion into Fayette.

“Obviously the pandemic occurred in 2020 and made it drastically difficult to not only keep matches we had but start new ones, so Fayette County was put on hold while we were trying to survive, just as all nonprofits were doing at that time,” Marquis said. “Finally, this year we were able to use grant funding to hire Brittany, who is dedicated to enrolling all volunteers and children in our Fayette program. She also attends any events in Fayette that will connect us to resources and other nonprofit agencies.”

“I think the biggest thing I’m looking forward to is just serving the 120 kids we have on our waitlist right now, so I’m excited to just keep recruiting our volunteers and making matches whenever we can,” Cooley said.

BBBSLR currently needs volunteers for its two programming options: school-based and community-based mentoring.

The school-based program is more structured, requiring “Bigs” to visit their “Littles” once a week during their lunch time and/or recess to eat with them; help with homework or reading; play educational games or do activities together; and much more.

Currently, the school-based mentoring is only established in the Laurel Highlands School District’s four elementary schools; but, Marquis said, plans are in place for programming in the Uniontown Area and Connellsville Area school districts.

Additionally, BBBSLR has partnered with the Brownsville Area School District to establish the Beyond School Walls mentoring program. Brownsville Area High School was specifically chosen due to its high

poverty rates, housing instability, lower graduation rates, etc. - in the hopes of breaking the cycle and equipping students with the skills and resources necessary to achieve success after high school.

The community-based program is more flexible, allowing mentors and their assigned youth to spend time together at least twice a month and engage in a myriad of activities in their communities and at home, with guardian approval.

“These volunteers are actually changing these kids’ lives through mentorship. They become a friend and support system for them that they may have been lacking prior to entering the program,” Marquis said. “We’ve been proven to help children perform better in schools; build better relationships with their peers and adults in their lives; build self-confidence; and avoid risky behavior, such as drugs and alcohol. We’re able to keep kids out of trouble and out of the juvenile corrections system, all because they were matched with a caring adult who is able to answer their questions, help them experience new things, guide them and be there for them.”

BBBSLR regularly receives tickets to sporting events, Pittsburgh CLO productions, the Carnegie Science Center, amusement parks and more - giving community-based program matches a variety of options for time together. The agency also hosts special events exclusively for matches and their families, such as a holiday party, summer picnic and more.

“What’s great about having so many organizations support us is that we can spend every penny we fundraise directly on our mission,” Marquis said. “That’s the beauty of collaboration. We’re always working to create mutually beneficial relationships within our communities. Right now, we’re working to find new funding streams and resources to expand our work in Fayette. That’s at the top of our list.”

All Big Brothers Big Sisters chapters nationwide are “JEDI” organizations, which stands for “Justice, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion.” Marquis said about 70 percent of the program’s participating children live in poverty; some have suffered abuse; face discrimination as minorities or members of the LGBT community; or have disabilities.

“Moving into Fayette, we know the areas are different, but we’re prepared to adapt and change, because we know the program will work excellently here,” Marquis said. “I never thought I’d see the day where our main office had seven staff members, so when we think about having more staff just assigned to Fayette - well, that’s a pipe dream, but it might be closer than we realize.”

Those interested in volunteering to be a “Big” can begin the process by inquiring online at www.bbbslr.org or emailing Cooley at Britt@bbbslr.org. On the website, select the “Be a Big” menu option to submit an inquiry form.

Prospective volunteers will be required to participate in an orientation phone call and information session led by Marquis, before deciding if the program is right for them. Volunteers must receive all FBI clearances, undergo fingerprinting, provide references, pass a background check and be interviewed.

Community-based program volunteers must be 18 or older with a valid driver’s license. School-based program volunteers can be freshmen in high school or older.

For more information about the national Big Brothers Big Sisters organization, visit www.bbbs.org.

For more information about Fayette County, visit www.FayetteCountyPA.org.

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