

Big Brother, Little Brother pair up for fun, companionship

By Karen Elowitz/Staff Writer
Thu Mar 29, 2007, 04:03 PM EDT

Allston -

To the average passerby, the sight of two guys playing “Sorry” in a café near Boston College would not normally rate a mention.

But the two guys in the corner booth at Moogy’s on Chestnut Hill Avenue last Sunday afternoon were doing more than just playing a board game. They were forging a special kind of bond.

Thirty-year-old Jim MacKenzie, a volunteer with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Massachusetts Bay, is a Big

Brother to Jaquri Alston, a fourth-grader at Garfield Middle School in Brighton. The two have been paired for a little more than a year, since MacKenzie got involved with the program back in December 2005 through his employer, New Balance, in Brighton.

Though most people think that Big Brother/Little Brother relationships are about imparting life lessons and making grand gestures, MacKenzie said that sometimes it’s just about playing a board game together.

“Not every meeting has to be a profound life-changing experience,” said MacKenzie, who meets up with Jaquri about once every two or three weeks. They usually get a bite to eat, pal around a bit and play some sports.

But this does not mean that he shirks his role as mentor to Jaquri, who lives in Dorchester. “When we get in the car, we can’t move until he tells me three things he learned at school that day,” MacKenzie said.

The shy, soft-spoken Jaquri doesn’t always say much, but he enjoys the perks of having a Big Brother who works for an athletic shoe company.

As he shows off his new shoes — a pair of black New Balance sneakers — MacKenzie laughs. “Every six months he needs a new pair,” he said, referring to how fast Jaquri is growing.

In the year and a half or so since they've been paired up, Jaquri has indeed grown quite a bit, according to MacKenzie. Physically, but also, he hopes, mentally.

"I try to expose him to a lot of things," said MacKenzie, who lives in Somerville. "You never know what event will have an impact later in life. We go bowling, to museums, anything. Also, twice he has asked to see where I work."

But it's not only Jaquri who benefits from the match. MacKenzie gets a sense of fulfillment out of knowing that just his presence can make a difference in someone's life.

"I could be out shooting hoops with a friend," he said, "but I'd rather do it with someone who needs a friend or companion." Weather permitting, the two regularly spend afternoons playing basketball in Brighton's Rodgers Park.

Though this is MacKenzie's first time acting as a Big Brother, he is no stranger to volunteer work, which was partly inspired by a work colleague.

"A mentor at a previous job would go to the Ronald McDonald House and donate his time," MacKenzie said. "He said no matter how busy you are, there are always people in need."

In addition to his work as a Big Brother, MacKenzie participates in other volunteer activities arranged by New Balance, including cleaning up local parks, and donating his time to Rosie's Place shelter for women and Brighton's Franciscan Hospital for Children.

New Balance is only one of 37 local corporations who partner with the Big Brothers organization, which has more than 2,400 active matches in the area, and more than 220,000 nationwide.

"The success of our program is built upon the generosity of spirit of the individuals and companies involved," said Big Brothers Big Sisters of Massachusetts Bay CEO John Pearson.

Pearson said that many people are hesitant at first to become involved, fearing that they don't have enough time or the right skill set to be a mentor.

But the Big Brothers organization makes it easy to participate. According to Pearson, the school-based program is a good place to get your feet wet if you're

unsure, because it allows “bigs” and “littles” to meet up in a neutral setting, for just one hour at a time.

However, about 15 percent of school-based Big Brothers and Big Sisters find that they like the relationship so much that they end up converting their relationship from a school-based one, to a more wide-ranging community-based one, like MacKenzie and Jaquri did.

“Once you pair up two people, it’s amazing what can happen within that relationship,” Pearson said.

For more information on how to become a Big Brother or Big Sister, visit www.bbbsmb.org or call 617-956-0281.