

West Hartford resident makes a difference as a mentor

By Pam Shearer
Correspondent

In November 2001 Steve Schutzer, 53, became a Big Brother with Nutmeg Big Brothers Big Sisters, a group that mentors children ages 6-17 who're growing up in single parent homes. An orthopedic surgeon at Hartford Hospital, Schutzer already had a busy practice, a wife and two teenage sons, and enough hobbies to fill every minute of spare time.

"The truth is I wanted to get involved with kids," Schutzer said. The West Hartford resident considered the Boys Club and the Police Athletic League, but both work with large groups of kids. Schutzer chose Big Brothers. "I thought one child at a time was the way to go; I could have a greater impact."

Mentors like Schutzer are called "Bigs," the children they work with "littles." On April 27 in Wethersfield, Schutzer will be honored with a Volunteer Recognition Award for the difference he's making with his "little," Patrick, a thoughtful and friendly teen, almost as tall as Schutzer. (Nutmeg Big Brothers Big Sisters releases first names only.) Now 15, Patrick, a Bloomfield resident, was a 10-year-old fifth grader when he and Schutzer first met.

"I wasn't really sure; would it work in my life?" Patrick said. "I've been let down a lot: I wasn't sure at the time."

Big Brothers Big Sisters works hard to match "bigs" with "littles," taking three to four months to screen both families with interviews and questionnaires. They also offer seminars for "bigs" on making the match work. At one of them, Schutzer learned one way to relate to kids is to ask what means most in life to the "little." Patrick's answer: "staying alive, world peace" impressed Schutzer. "Wow! This kid's got capacity," he recalled later. "I knew it was going to work ever since."

But Patrick needed help developing his potential, especially in school where he was receiving a D in math. Schutzer helped the little become more focused his schoolwork. Furthermore, he also helped Patrick's mom correct some health problems.

"He looked out for all of us," said Patrick, the oldest of three boys.

Now Schutzer's got Patrick thinking more on his future, one that could now include medicine, a dream Patrick's had since he was young. This year Patrick's a freshman at

Capitol Prep Magnet School in Hartford. Every day he wears a blazer with a crest, khaki pants, and a tie to school, definitely not his favorite outfit. But Schutzer reminds Patrick that he dresses up for work every day. Patrick condenses Schutzer's advice about doing what you don't like: "There's a lot I don't want to do. If you wanna be a better person, you have to make sacrifices."

Patrick gets tutoring in math and science from Schutzer's son Matt, a Colgate graduate soon to enter medical school. The Schutzer family, which includes youngest son Michael and Schutzer's wife Karen, made Patrick a part of the family from the get-go.



Patrick and Steve Schutzer are both Yankee fans and active athletes, Patrick in track at Capitol Prep and Schutzer in martial arts.

Photo by Pam Shearer

"It's like one big family," said Patrick. "It feels like Matt and Michael are my older brothers."

At minimum, Nutmeg Big Brothers expects volunteers to spend at least four hours every other week with his/her "little." Adding on their phone time, Schutzer and Patrick hit that goal easily, sometimes getting together two weekends in a row with some spent at Schutzer's farm in upstate New York. They've gone fishing, even tried laser tag. (Schutzer's good at the first, not so hot at the second.) Often the pair enjoy dinner and a movie. Favorite restaurants include

Cheng Du, Harry's, and Barb's in West Hartford, Wood n Tap and Park Avenue Pizza in Hartford. Schutzer says his favorite movie was "Johnson Family Vacation" with Cedric the Entertainer, a silly movie he said he wouldn't watch with his wife but loved with Patrick. So far the only outing that flopped was a trip to the Wadsworth Atheneum.

Schutzer appreciates Patrick's willingness to try new things. Patrick's music once was mostly rappers like 50 Cent; now he also listens to Arrowsmith, Guns and Roses, and even some country like Tim McGraw. To a diet that used to be mostly tacos and grinders, Patrick has added tomatoes and won ton soup. But so far, no fish.

"We're working on it," said Schutzer.

For his part, Patrick appreciates Schutzer's patience "to mold me into the man I'm going to be." Yet Patrick isn't the only one growing through the relationship. Seeing the world through Patrick's eyes has taught Schutzer how difficult it is to be a teen, as he learns firsthand problems teens deal with today. Schutzer is convinced he's getting much more than he gives, inspiring him to write an open letter encouraging others to mentor. Mentoring may not bring the immediate results surgery does, but Schutzer doesn't mind.

"It expands your appreciation of life," said Schutzer who looks forward to time spent with Patrick. "It just makes life so much sweeter to be involved with [this] young man."

Patrick can't stop talking when he explains why Schutzer deserves a Volunteer Recognition Award.

"Steve is a busy person," he said. "I don't even know how he makes time for me and stuff like that. I didn't believe he had time for me . . . I really like him. I really can't explain. He's helped me a lot. I thought I wanted to make it into college but I never really thought I could. He made a lot of opportunities to help me out, help my family out; he made a lot of sacrifices for me."

Schutzer wasn't expecting the award, believing others do much more; his family and Patrick will attend the awards ceremony. Although the match officially ends at age 18, Schutzer and Patrick plan to stay friends as many "bigs" and "littles" do. Patrick has some advice for anyone who mentors.

"If you're a bigger brother, don't quit on that child," said Patrick. "There's bad times and good times. Don't quit on him."

For more information about the awards ceremony or how to become a Nutmeg Big Brother Big Sister visit www.nutmegbigbrothersbigsisters.org

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