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## At school, a 'Big' visit makes a big difference

**Big Brothers Big Sisters matches college students with counterparts at a West Philadelphia middle school.**

By Julie Stoiber

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As adolescents full of pent-up energy burst out the doors of Shaw Middle School, small, soft-spoken Abby Natelson, a University of Pennsylvania senior, made her way into the West Philadelphia school.

She was there earlier this month for an after-school visit with sixth grader Sakeena Mann. They headed for a sunny computer lab, where Mann sang her favorite song, "Let Me Love You," for Natelson.

Theirs was a lighthearted moment in a national drive to improve the prospects of at-risk children.

Natelson, 22, and Mann, 11, were linked by Big Brothers Big Sisters, which is testing at Shaw a new approach in its expanding school-based mentoring effort: matching an entire classroom, rather than a few handpicked students, in one-on-one relationships with adults.

"If we can surround enough kids, we can affect the educational experience and we can affect the community," said Judy Vredenburg, president and chief executive officer of Philadelphia-based Big Brothers Big Sisters.

Several times a month, "Bigs" from Penn - including members of the men's basketball team - hook up with the 27 "Littles" in Mann's class. Visits are staggered, depending on the volunteers' class and practice schedules.

"When an entire classroom can have a Big Brother or Big Sister, the ability for that teacher to teach improves," said Marlene Olshan, head of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southeastern Pennsylvania, which oversees the Shaw pilot. "The Shaw program is a

model for what we need to do elsewhere."

In his classroom, teacher Freeden Oeur has built math and English lessons around the matches. His students wrote stories about themselves for their Bigs; after Quakers games, they use basketball statistics to review math concepts.

"More than anything else, it gives the kids a lot to be excited about," said Oeur, who is with Teach for America, which sends recent college graduates into troubled schools.

That is a bonus in a school where many of the 780 students are from poor, single-parent families, and nearly a quarter of them are transient, coming and going during a school year.

Said Shaw principal Sharif El-Mekki: "When we're looking at a whole-child approach, mentoring has to be a component."

Big Brothers Big Sisters, in both school- and community-based mentoring, emphasizes fun. At Shaw, Bigs and Littles go off in pairs to shoot hoops or play board games. One day, Mann and Natelson jumped rope.

"We were doing it with two ropes, and she showed me how to twirl," Natelson said.

As El-Mekki watched the pair interact, next to where Penn student Nicky Berman sat talking to her Little Sister, Hillary Harris, he reflected on the importance of seemingly simple exchanges.

"For the middle-years child, they need the individual attention, they need to be heard," he said. "One-on-one, that's where the connection is made, and that's what a lot of the kids here may not have."

For a century, Big Brothers Big Sisters has matched adults with children in need. A study of the group in the early 1990s showed that such relationships made a child less likely to miss school and use drugs and alcohol.

Joseph Tierney was the lead investigator on that study for Public/Private Ventures, a national nonprofit group that assesses social programs and policies.

Tierney now is executive director of Penn's Robert A. Fox Leadership Program, and he recruited more than 100 students to serve as school mentors for Big Brothers Big Sisters.

"I am a true believer," he said.

The partnership among Big Brothers Big Sisters, Teach for America, and Fox Leadership, as well as Shaw's proximity to the Penn campus, made the school ideal for the pilot, which Big Brothers Big Sisters would like to extend to other schools.

Big Brothers Big Sisters implemented school-based mentoring in the early 1990s, and now is making it the centerpiece of its growth strategy.

"It is a significant way to attract large numbers of volunteers and kids," Vredenburgh said.

In 1999, the organization had 27,000 school-based matches in public and private schools nationwide. It now has more than four times that number, with school matches surpassing community matches as Big Brothers Big Sisters strives to reach one million children by 2010.

The school setting, with its structure, predictability, and shorter time commitment, opens the door for volunteers who might not be available for community-based mentoring, in which adults and children meet evenings and weekends for recreational activities.

In another twist on Big Brothers Big Sisters tradition, Sharon Albert's fifth-grade class at Comly Elementary School in the Far Northeast gets a weekly visit from students at nearby George Washington High School.

"Anytime somebody else is looking out for you, what you're doing, how you're doing, it helps," Albert said.

Charlie Hall, match-support specialist in charge of the Shaw program, said Penn mentors try to visit three times a month or more.

"If the kids had their way, the Bigs would be there every day," Hall said.

Raymond Gibson, 12, made that clear.

He stood at the doorway of the computer room at Shaw, repeatedly yelling to Mann. She ignored him, so he barged in, eager to talk about his Big, too. That would be Tim Begley, captain of Penn's basketball team.

Gibson wished it had been his day for a visit.

"I got into a bad situation today," he said. "I'm going to call him."

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