



PENN PALS

by [Sam Donnellon](#)

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Little brothers can be a pain. Just ask Penn basketball captain Tim Begley.

"I saw you get locked down twice last week," 12-year-old Raymond Gibson told him this week when they renewed a relationship forged through the Big Brothers Big Sisters program at Shaw Middle School.

Begley scored six points in the Quakers' 89-52 loss at Providence, and 15 in their 77-44 loss at Wisconsin.

"A very honest opinion on his part," Begley says.

And one that only thickened the bond between the senior guard and the ebullient sixth-grader with whom he was matched when this pilot program was launched about a month ago, in conjunction with the Teach For America program.

Once a week, Begley and his Quakers teammates make the 10-minute drive from the Penn campus to 54th and Warrington to spend an hour or 2 with boys from Mr. Oeur's sixth-grade class. Some of the 28 students have been matched with the Penn players. Others are matched with other students from Penn's Robert A. Fox Leadership Program.

Penn coach Fran Dunphy, who has been involved with Big Brothers Big Sisters for more than three decades, met with his team in September and suggested strongly that this was a good thing to do. All agreed enthusiastically.

"It's their way of giving back to the community," the coach says. "I told them — because it's been true for me and so many others — that the only person this will mean more to than them is you."

Says sophomore guard Lorenz Manthey, a 21-year-old from Hamburg, Germany, who has spent much of the last 4 years chasing his dream of playing college basketball: "I've grown to appreciate what surrounding with family does for a person.

"Plus, I never had a little brother. So this is not a one-sided experience."

Players come to the school on Mondays or Fridays, based on their schedules. On Monday, Begley and two other players were greeted upon arrival as if they were LeBron James, Allen Iverson and Shaquille O'Neal.

It is up to the little brother how they will spend their weekly hour. Quickly, Gibson grabbed Begley from the crowded classroom and headed for the school's patched-up gym. (Tryouts for the school team begin next week.) Meanwhile, Dominic Anderson, 12, pulled big brother Mark Zoller, Penn's sophomore forward and former St. Joe's Prep standout, toward the classroom computer, while 11-year-old Tyriek Macey and his big brother, Manthey, just kind of hung out, shooting the breeze.

"That's one of the things I like about those two," says Charlie Hall, the Big Brothers Big

Sisters specialist who made the matches. "These relationships are still young, so there's still a pack thing going on. But Tyriek and Lorenz broke off immediately. That one-on-one thing is really great to see."

Not that it surprised him. Hall interviewed brothers and sisters, big and small, and carefully made the alliances. "Many of these matches have connections — could be interests, family structure, significant life events, etc. — that they haven't even necessarily realized yet," Hall wrote in a followup e-mail yesterday. "It's very exciting to watch those bonds forming."

Manthey seemed almost sad when he said he did not have an older brother. Macey was clearly sad and confused when he spoke about the problems an older brother was having.

Zoller, a bushy-haired, 6-7 teddy bear, rarely dropped his smile. Neither did Dominic. Hall recalls both were cutups during the interview process.

Says Zoller of his little brother, "Seems like he's a little bit of a troublemaker. He's always sitting in the corner. I think he just likes to have fun."

This one-on-one dimension is what Big Brothers has been about since its inception: Finding people in the community who can help a single-parent child with issues of self-confidence, peer pressure, motivation.

People like Dunphy who, in the words of Begley, "is as Philly as you can get."

But as Dunphy will tell you, his family moved from its home on Ruby Street — just two blocks from Shaw — when he was 10. Who knew he would return to make a career just a few miles away? Who knew that one day players from one of his teams would help launch this pilot program near the playground he played on for the first 10 years of his life?

That was just coincidence.

The reason this program was launched at Shaw has a lot more to do with the 18-month tenure of principal Sharif El-Mekki. "He's done amazing things over there," Hall says. "He's made it his mission to seek every opportunity he can."

El-Mekki's success in improving Shaw has been great. So great that it has become an impediment. Eight of 10 students are from low-income families and all but 8 percent receive free or reduced-price lunches. Based on its transient history, the school was allotted a budget based on 580 students this year, El-Mekki said. Because of the reputation the school has built in his short tenure, however, enrollment is about 780.

Increased involvement from the parents helps, Shaw's principal said. "We tell them all the time that we're just visitors,"

El-Mekki says. "This is their school."

And these are their kids. BBBS is a wonderful program, and studies have linked the program to improved school performance and attendance. It's the ultimate goal for a program like this to propel a child past the incredible obstacles that lie ahead — underlined by the fatal shooting outside of Strawberry Mansion High this week.

It's not a probable one. "You can't really hope or expect those kind of miracles," Hall says. "But I think of mentors that I've had that have taught me something that I've kept. Like keeping eye contact with people. You hope for something small like that."

Dunphy is understandably proud of Philadelphia native Steve Nesmith, the assistant secretary for the Office of Congressional and Intergovernmental Relations. The Penn coach met Nesmith at Dobbins, helped him get to Malvern Prep, then watched as he graduated from American University and entered into politics.

As Begley signals the other two players that time before practice begins is running short, little brothers Anderson and Gibson present a binder covered with their hoops-oriented artwork, filled with newspaper clippings of their big brothers' exploits as well as stats culled from Penn's Internet.

Zoller takes some ribbing from his little brother about a picture of a ball hitting his face. The stats, Oeur says, have been integrated into the math lessons of the day.

Small things. Candles seeking to light a fuse before it frays.

"Everybody always thanks us for coming," Begley says. "They've got it backwards."