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SUPER VOLUNTEER // YOU SHOULD KNOW ... PAGE 13

Candle Lighting: 4:27 p.m.

100 Years, 100 (Thousand) Stories

Jewish Big Brother Big Sister Program celebrates its centennial
Story begins on page 36

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PLUS:

SCHOOL FUNDING
HOGAN INCREASES
PAGE 16

BAGEL BIZ DOWN
GOLDBERG'S WOES
PAGE 28

Cover Story »



100 Years, *100 (Thousand) Stories*

Jewish Big Brother Big Sister Program celebrates its centennial

By Hannah Monicken

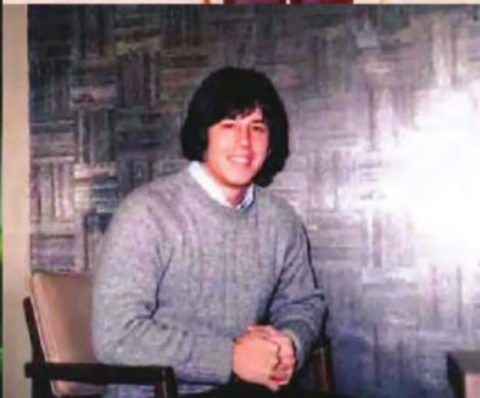




Do the math

and there is a glimpse into the impact of the Jewish Big Brother Big Sister Program in Baltimore — tens of thousands of lives (perhaps even more) meaningfully, personally changed over 100 years.

But this isn't a numbers story. It's a human one. From the forging of lifelong friendships to the inspiring of generations to be involved as adults, the Jewish Big Brother Big Sister Program is as much a collection of feel-good stories as it is a long-running community service organization.



All photos are provided

"It doesn't get any better than [those stories] for me, personally or professionally" said Beth Hecht, senior manager for the program, which has been housed under the umbrella of Jewish Community Services of Baltimore for eight years. "Almost daily I hear a success story. It's really knowing you've made a difference."

The Jewish Big Brother Big Sister Program celebrated its 100th year in 2016. And though it is now known as a mentorship program for young people, it started out, perhaps surprisingly, through prison visitation. In 1914, a few enterprising local Jews took it upon themselves to visit Jewish inmates in prison and stem the tide of “delinquency or delinquent tendency” in young Jewish boys, according to an article from the old weekly community magazine the “Jewish Comment” that was quoted in “The History of Jewish Big Brother League, Inc.” by Joseph F. Hecht, a book that chronicles the first 50 years of the organizations in impressive — and occasionally mind-numbing — detail.

"Already it has become manifest that there are many Jewish boys being weakened by street associations, who would, if surrounded by proper influence, develop into self-respecting men," the article goes

on to say in what feels like a slightly hyperbolic manner.

By 1916, the group had incorporated with a board of wide-ranging active community members. The board included a playwright, the executive director of the Federated Jewish Charities (now The Associated Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore), a federal judge, a milliner and the eventual vice president of a dry goods wholesale operation, among others.

(The organization, apparently realizing girls, too, could come under the sway of “street associations,” started mentoring girls on an ad hoc basis starting in the early 1930s. Demand steadily increased until the program recognized a need to sustainably include services for girls about 30 years later. Incidentally, Rose Zetzer, the first woman to be admitted to the Maryland State Bar, added another “first” to her list as the first official Big Sister in 1934.)

These days, the organization is less focused on the potential for delinquency or "street associations" and more on providing a steady source of support and guidance for any child in the program. However, the main component of the program has changed very little over the

years — matching an adult volunteer, the “Big,” with a child aged 7 to 17 (the average age is about 10 to 12) of a single parent or otherwise needing of some outside direction, the “Little,” based on common interests, background, hobbies or a certain *je ne sais quoi* that makes program staff believe two would be compatible.

The Big and Little get together two or three times per month for a couple hours, and this relationship can span anywhere from one to two years to lifetimes, although the Littles age out officially once they've graduated high school.

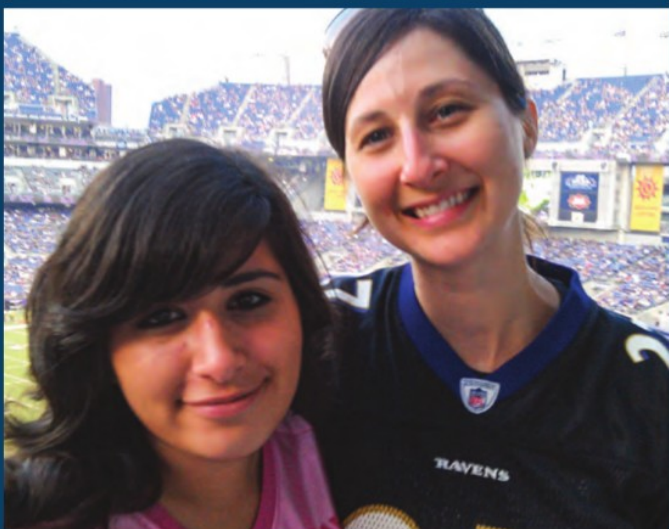
Gary Katz, native Baltimorean and current Canadian, was about 12 when he met his Big, then 22-year-old David Cooper.

Right page: Clockwise from top left: Gary Katz with Sheryl Cooper at the zoo; young David Cooper; Cooper (right) with Katz's former Little Brother David Morand; Cooper and Katz (third from left) with family in 2013; Robin Arnold (right) and her Little Sister in 2012; Cooper and Katz with Cooper's daughter Sheryl

Below: A compilation of old Jewish Big Brother Big Sister Program newspaper clippings and photos

All photos are provided





“Reflecting on the many years I’ve known you, I can believe nothing more strongly than that you and I were meant to meet and to mean a great deal to each other.”

— David Cooper in a letter to his once Little Brother on his Little Brother’s 50th birthday

Sheryl Cooper, David's daughter, had only recently been born and remembers Katz growing up with the family.

"He was my father's Little Brother, but he was sort of like a big brother in my family," she said, recalling Katz coming over regularly and joining the family for day trips and holidays.

For Katz, Cooper was a friend, a confidante, a brother/father/adult male figure he could look up to. The transition from the Big-Little relationship to an adult friendship evolved naturally and came easily, he said.

"Dave was truly an amazing human being — very, very warm, very compassionate. Dave made me very much a part of his family," Katz said. "He also was a major help in finding my roots in Judaism. I was always invited to his parents' home for Passover and different Jewish holidays, which was wonderful for me."

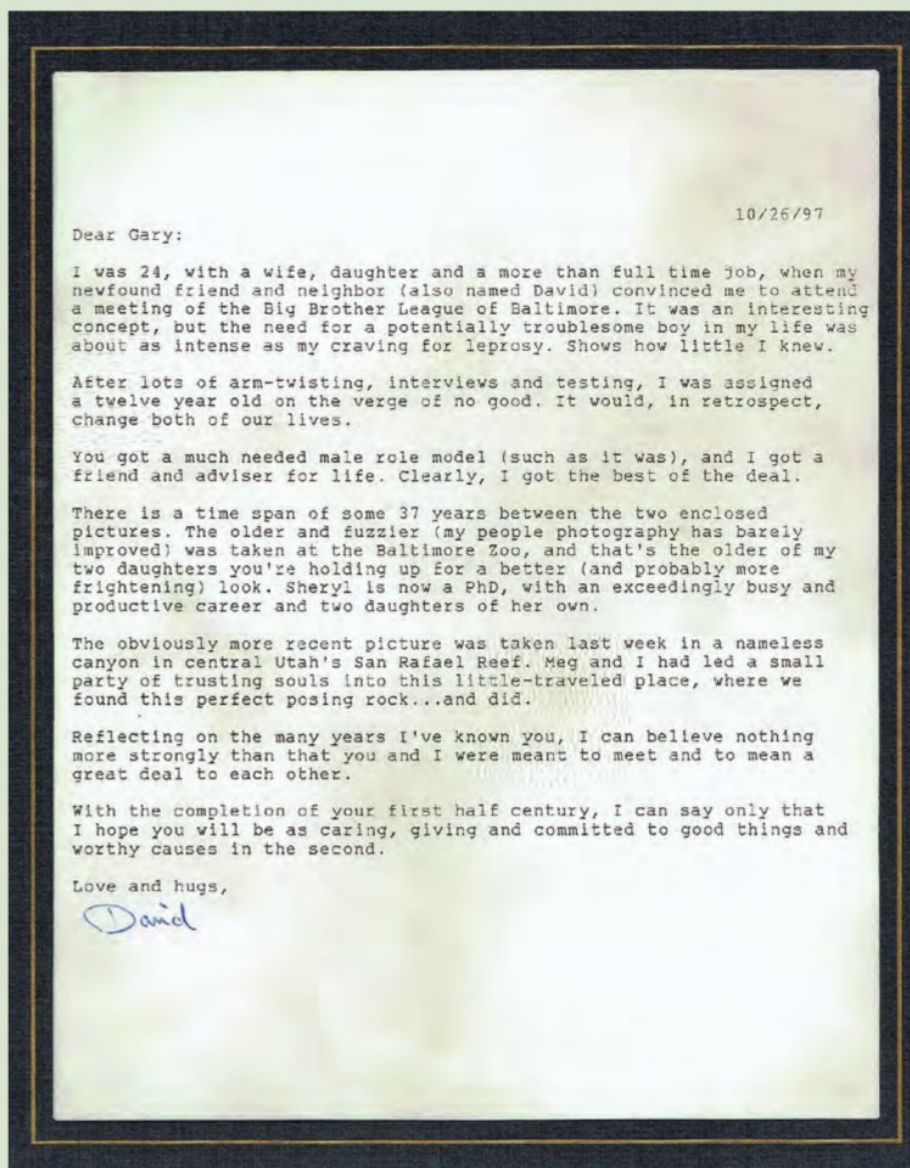
From trips to the Maryland Zoo in Baltimore during their Big-Little time to visiting each other's families for weeklong vacations as adults, Cooper and Katz never went too long without communicating. And when healthy, vibrant 81-year-old David Cooper was in an accident while visiting his daughter in California this past September, Gary Katz joined Cooper's two daughters at his deathbed.

"I would say that Gary is just as distressed over my father's death as my sister and I are," Sheryl Cooper said.

So much did David Cooper love his experience as a Big Brother that Sheryl and her sister included the Jewish Big Brother Big Sister Program as one of the two organizations they asked people to donate money to in lieu of gifts. So far, more than \$500 has been raised in his name.

So, while David Cooper can't speak to the impact being a Big Brother had on his life, it is apparent through photos, the testaments of his family and even his own words.

"Reflecting on the many years I've known you," he says in a letter he wrote to his once Little Brother on his 50th birthday (Katz is 69 now), "I can believe nothing more strongly than that you and I were meant to meet and to mean a great deal to each other."



David Cooper wrote this letter to his once Little Brother, Gary Katz, on Katz's 50th birthday. They were lifelong friends.

But, as it turns out, the Big Brother program was to gift Katz with not just one best friend, but two. Inspired by his time with David Cooper, he signed up to be a Big Brother himself in his current home of Windsor, Ontario. There wasn't a Jewish-specific version of the program there, so he signed up with the main local Big Brother organization, who then paired him with his Little Brother. And, thus, another David, David Morand, entered his life.

Like the David before him, David

Morand and Gary Katz became more than just Big and Little Brothers. In fact, they had spoken on the phone just the day before Katz spoke with the *Jewish Times*. And, completing the circle, David Cooper and David Morand became good friends themselves.

Again, inspired by those who came before him, David Morand was also a Big Brother, playing out an extended ripple effect. From one stone, David Cooper, came the ripples of three beneficiaries

then creating ripples of their own — four generations of involvement.

Amazingly, this is not an uncommon story. Or, at least the part where a Little is inspired to become a Big isn't. Robin Arnold, now an accounting manager at Constellation Energy Baltimore, moved to the area with her mother when she was about 8 years old. A new city and new school — she was enrolled in Beth Tfiloh Dahan Community School — can be an overwhelming prospect for a child, so her mother, a single parent, signed her up for the Jewish Big Brother Big Sister Program.

"It was just really nice to have someone who was an adult who was interested in me but wasn't trying to parent me," Arnold said. "It's a different dynamic."

She felt like having her Big Sister made her special, and she valued having someone to look to for support who wasn't her mother or her peers. By early high school, she knew she wanted to be a Big Sister herself someday, a promise she fulfilled

once she moved back to the area.

Today, her Little is in college, but they are still in touch and try to see each other whenever they are in the same place.

"It really was one of those experiences where I got just as much out of it as I think she did," Arnold said.

And the fact that it is specifically Jewish is part of what made it so special for many, including both Katz and Arnold.

"It's important to me to be connected to my Jewish roots — Jewish Big Brother Big Sister has played a big part in that," she said.

The program has had such staying power over the years for just this reason, says Howard Gartner, once a Big Brother and later a board member and president back when it was the League and, more recently, for the JCS.

"It's a tried-and-true program," he said. "There's never going to stop being a need for young boys and girls to have strong mentors in their lives."

This is exactly the same sentiment Hecht expressed. Mentoring is all the rage now, she says, but the Big Brother Big Sister program has been doing it for a century.

"I really think it's the power of mentoring," she said. "Kids need role models and, over the course of years, that endures."

Although, for Gary Katz, it's even simpler than that.

"Well, you might laugh at this, but the first word that came to my mind was love — love over a period of time," he said. "On the one-to-one basis, I think eventually if that kind of growth and love and caring develops over time, how can you not have a successful organization?" JT

For more information on how to become a Big Brother or Big Sister or enroll your child, go to jcsbaltimore.org.

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