

Big Brother, Big Heart

Alumnus recognized for volunteerism

On a warm afternoon in Syracuse's Valley neighborhood, Kevin Phelps '01 and Zach enjoy a game of hide-and-seek at a school playground.

The two trade jokes and toss a football back and forth as they take a walk back to Kevin's house a few blocks away. The notion of ice cream is kicked around briefly.

The scene fits father and son, best friends or brothers. But Kevin and Zach have a unique link.

Zach Dahlem is Kevin's "Little" through the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. They've developed a tight bond in the more than 18 months they've spent together.

"After a year together, you grow really attached," Phelps said. "We've become close enough that an 'I love you' isn't out of the question."

A zoology major at Oswego, Phelps is a senior lab animal technician at SUNY Upstate Medical University in Syracuse. Dahlem, 11, is a middle schooler diagnosed with muscular dystrophy.

The unlikely pair spends far more than the minimum eight to 10 hours together each month – sometimes it's 30 or more. That's one reason Phelps was named New York state's "Big Brother of the Year" for 2008 by the organization.

The attention Phelps and Dahlem have received this year from local media,

government and the Big Brothers Big Sisters organization itself has been surprising to both of them.

The city of Syracuse named May 15 in their honor, some university students filmed a documentary about them and the daily newspaper featured a front page story on their relationship. Kevin and Zach have been tapped for public service announcements for the United Way and the Muscular Dystrophy Association.

Dahlem has a simpler explanation for what make Phelps worthy.

"He does everything with me," the energetic Dahlem says with a sudden coyness. Zach is somewhat shy about describing his friend and mentor while in his presence.



Kevin Phelps '01 and Zach Dahlem share a quiet moment.

GARY WALTS, THE POST-STANDARD



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Kevin Phelps '01 and Zach Dahlem enjoy a cookout during a Big Brother outing.

Slowly, the details begin to trickle out that they particularly enjoy cooking together. A bracelet with the inscription, “Thank you for being the ultimate big brother. Love, Zach” reveals more about Little’s feelings for his Big than his words do.

“Ninety-nine percent of the time, we do stuff that I would be doing anyway: playing video games, cooking dinner, grocery shopping,” Phelps said.

In nicer weather, the two make their way to area parks to play sports or match wits in a game of hide-and-seek. The pair plans to attempt woodworking in Phelps’ basement shop.

Dahlem says he enjoys learning new things from his Big.

Learning, Growing

Big Brothers Big Sisters was the first volunteer activity that Phelps became involved in.

His involvement in student organizations at Oswego was limited to the Asian Student Union. A Caucasian himself, Phelps was invited to join by an Asian roommate he had.

“I met a lot of people that really had an impact on my life” at Oswego, Phelps said, naming biology Professor Leland Marsh as one of the most influential.

“There was a huge difference in me between freshman year and senior year.”

An animal lover since grade school, Phelps knew he wanted to get into a related field and determined that Oswego offered the best, most economical zoology program.

“One of my favorite memories is wrestling with a mountain lion in a lobby in Piez Hall,” Phelps said. The lion’s caretaker had handed the leash over to him for a quick babysitting session that naturally became a bout of strength.

Kevin now works with lab animals at SUNY Upstate Medical University. He recently created an outreach program that takes him to area schools to talk about his job and the benefits of animal research.

He also dedicates his free time to clearing up misconceptions about his other passion, the Big Brothers Big Sisters program.

“I think that we’ve learned a lot from each other,” Kevin said of his relationship with Zach. “I thought that if a kid had muscular dystrophy, he couldn’t do much.

“(Zach) can do just about everything,” he said.

Phelps also learned that the Big Brothers Big Sisters program doesn’t cater exclusively to needy families or children with particularly serious health issues.

Most importantly, he says, he’s learned it doesn’t take a lot to make a difference in someone’s life.

“It’s people that take time out to not be selfish that really make a difference,” said Phelps. ●

— Shane M. Liebler