

# Big Brothers Big Sisters

by Michael Baroni

**T**hroughout history, babies in orphanages routinely died without any apparent explanation. People finally realized that it wasn't some disease, or for lack of food or shelter—it was for want of love. Lack of human touch, care, and attention. In recent years, science has proven the link: Without physical affection and positive interaction, a baby's growth hormones and immune system fail to develop, the body loses its ability to metabolize food, and the baby slides into a fatal shut down.

In fact, many studies have shown that lack of cuddling, rocking, being spoken to, and just plain old parental neglect, result in children having emotional problems, smaller brains, and impaired physical development. Bottom line, children need positive, loving attention. Without it, they starve inside.

Big Brothers Big Sisters is one of the world's premiere charitable organizations which matches responsible, caring adults ("Bigs") with children ("Littles") in need of positive, adult interaction and mentoring.

The OCBA and the O.C. branch of Big Brothers Big Sisters recently established an official relationship. And if lending a "Big" hand to help a "Little" one appeals to you, read on.

## Roots in Justice

In 1902, Ernest Coulter, a New York City Court Clerk, helped to organize the Children's Court. He was alarmed at the escalating wave of young boys coming through the court system, but noticed that when the children had a positive role model in their lives, they were far less likely to reappear in the court system. So he sought volunteers to mentor these troubled boys, in



one-to-one matches. Dozens of men became mentors, and by 1904, Big Brothers was born.

Concurrently, the Ladies of Charity were reaching out to girls coming through the New York Children's Court. It changed its name to Catholic Big Sisters, and continued to operate independently of Big Brothers until 1977, when the two groups merged to form Big Brothers Big Sisters of America.

It has grown in stature and influence ever since, currently helping over 270,000 children a year. In recent years, Big Brothers Big Sisters partnered with the NFL to air a public service announcement during the Super Bowl (the first-ever Super Bowl PSA). It has been recognized by Presidents Clinton, Bush ("W."), and Obama, and in October 2011, the charity was awarded First Place in Philanthropedia's list of the most reputable non-profits serving at-risk youth.

## Little Town, Big Dreams

What do Alaska and football have in common? Not much, unless you're Keith Rhodes, CEO of Orange County's Big Brothers Big Sisters.

Keith grew up in the wilds of Alaska, living amongst Eskimo tribes. His father was Alaska's

first African-American State Trooper, with several hundred miles of remote territory under his domain. Keith grew up around seal-skin balls,

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”

not footballs. But when his family moved to the Mat-Su Valley near Anchorage, Keith was waved over by the high school coach to fill in for an injured player.

The first time an ice-crusted pigskin was

thrust into his hands, Keith broke for a run. On the next play he caught a downfield pass.

And the legend of the "Black Eskimo" was born, Keith jokes. Actually, that moniker was given to him by Eddie Robinson, his coach at Grambling University (the 2nd winningest coach in college history). Under Robinson's tutelage, Keith's fiery determination to achieve greatness further solidified, and he became a Southwest Athletic Conference All-American (for athletic/academic excellence).

Keith was passed over in the NFL draft, but that didn't deter him; he managed to impress the New Orleans Saints in a tryout, and within three weeks was vaulted to the first-string. But tragically, before he ever enjoyed his professional debut, he suffered a career-ending injury—"my knee-cap was knocked all the way up into my hip pocket."

Keith was devastated. He couldn't imagine life without football. But after months of agonizing rehabilitation, and with the "blessing" of a scholarship, he returned to Grambling to attain his Masters of Science degree in Criminology (with an emphasis in Juvenile Delinquency and Domestic Terrorism).

While engaged in his graduate studies, for-

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mer friends from the NFL visited campus to speak about volunteering at the Methodist Home for Children, where they read bed-time stories to abused, lonely children. Keith was moved, and promptly participated. "It opened my eyes to the shocking levels of abuse and neglect children suffer."

Keith, a devout Christian, now felt that God had redirected his life to help little ones. "That was it for me. I dedicated my life to improving the lives of children."

For his first 10 years after graduation, Keith worked at the Methodist Home for

Children in Grambling, LA—a highly regarded children's shelter. He was then hired to "clean up" the Methodist Home in New Orleans—known as one of the most deplorable children's homes in the country.

Keith was horrified beyond his worst imaginings. The New Orleans "home" was located on the "deadliest street" in the city, where blood on the sidewalk was a regular fixture. Inside, raw sewage leaked through the ceiling and dripped down walls. Rats. Roaches.

Keith summoned his inner athletic warrior to fight an exhausting, David-versus-

Goliath, battle against local, political corruption. He enlisted the help of good cops, judges, and city council members, and utilized the media to full advantage. Eventually, he had turned that hell-hole dwelling into a nurturing sanctuary.

But just when Keith thought the proverbial "storm" had cleared, Hurricane Katrina hit. He fled North, with over 100 children in tow, to the Methodist Home in Reston, LA. Despite the overcrowding, the home provided shelter and food, and provided sports and games to try and lighten the childrens' emotional pains. Nonetheless, says Keith, "The post-traumatic stress that these children experienced, I don't think will ever go away."

## All "Rhodes" Lead to O.C.

New Orleans was too battered for Keith Rhodes to remain. And so was he. After 20 years of dealing with unspeakable atrocities against children in crime-riddled neighborhoods, Keith was compelled to move his family to safer, more nurturing surroundings.

He was named Executive Director of Boys Town, and took charge of their California operations (Boys Town was founded in 1917 by Father Flanagan, and immortalized in the film, *Boys Town*, starring Spencer Tracey and Mickey Rooney).

Like his previous positions, at Boys Town Keith made a reputation for himself as one who could achieve rapid and remarkable success—and in 2010, he was recruited by Big Brothers Big Sisters to serve as CEO of their Orange County operations.

## The Ultimate Matchmaker

The O.C. branch of Big Brothers Big Sisters has grown swiftly since Keith took the helm. One key to his success lies in recruiting leaders throughout the community who can use their influential standing to advance the cause. They help 2,000 children a year by matching Bigs (responsible, caring volunteers) with Littles (children 6–18, who are desperate for positive, adult mentoring and interaction).

Lisa Wright, VP of Development, states that "Littles must have a demonstrated need." Mostly, this means poverty-level living and/or a single parent household (e.g., a parent abandoned the home, is incarcerated, or there is a recent divorce). On occasion, a Little may be a wealthier child in a one-parent home who is

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desperate for companionship and direction from a positive role model. In all cases, the Littles must desire the mentoring relationship themselves (not be pushed into it by a parent), and the parent(s) must fully support their child's relationship to a Big; Big Brothers Big Sisters never tries to force itself into a family.

In Orange County, approximately 70% of Littles are Hispanic. Almost all Littles on the waiting list are boys—so there is a serious need for male Bigs. Sadly, Littles can wait a year or more to be matched with a Big.

Operations at O.C. Big Brothers Big Sisters are overseen by an executive team and a staff of 40 full and part-time specialists (all of whom have at minimum undergraduate degrees in child development, psychology, or social work). Lisa Wright explains that Bigs are screened through background checks and in-person interviews. The staff works to match Bigs and Littles by similar interests, in addition to any and all other relevant factors (particularly things which the Little's parent(s) may care about (e.g., religious faith or ethnic background). If a match seems promising, the Big and Little meet to see if they are comfortable with one another and compatible.

People who volunteer as a Big must commit to spend four hours with their Little, two to four times a month, for a full year—although many relationships last far longer. There are 80 year-old Bigs, for example, whose "Little" is now in their 50s.

Keith says, "One of the incredible things we hear from Bigs is how their Little enriches their life just as much—if not more—than they enrich the Little's."

Bigs primarily pick up their Littles at their homes, or sometimes their schools, then head out to bring new experiences and surroundings to the Little. It's the human interaction that counts, affirms both Keith and Lisa—not spending money on the Little. In fact, Big Brothers Big Sisters discourages spending too much money and encourages more interactive and life-expanding and lower-cost activities, such as playing catch, museums, walks through nice neighborhoods, beach activities, movies, book stores and reading, listening to or playing music, visiting a college campus to stir their determination for higher education, playing board and video games, etc. Just sitting together and talking is often the most nurturing and trea-

sured thing for a Little.

"Some of these kids look forward to their Big outings like other kids look forward to Christmas," says Keith. All of these seemingly simplistic activities are life-altering for the Littles. Many have "never seen the beach, even though they might live in Santa Ana. One Little cried when eating a hotdog at Angels stadium because he'd never had a hotdog or seen a baseball game." Others have never been on an amusement ride, thrown a Frisbee, or been to an ice cream shop.

Through it all, the Big Brothers Big Sisters staff maintains close contact with the Little (and his or her family) and the Big, monitoring the relationship and its effectiveness.

## Success of O.C. Big Brothers

Under the leadership of Keith Rhodes and his team, the O.C. branch of Big Brothers Big Sisters is the fastest growing, established chapter in the nation—and it is all done on a "shoe string" financial model. Big Brothers Big Sisters needs just \$1,500 a year per child to operate, whereas traditional shelters can easily cost \$65,000 a year or more per child (and just think of the cost to society if a teenager becomes a

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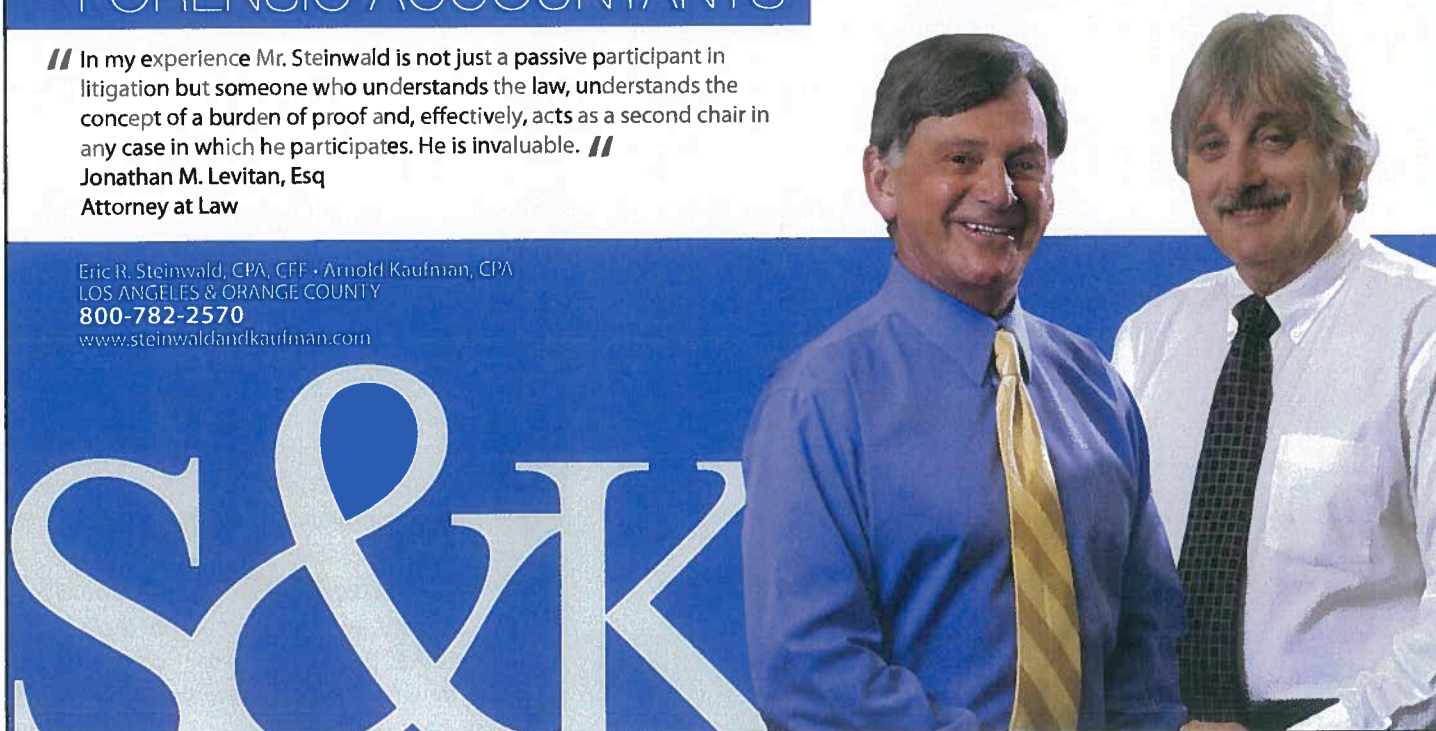
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criminal and is incarcerated). And for more than 100 years, the Big Brothers Big Sisters model has proven to be far more effective. Consider some of the past year's statistics: 100% of Littles graduated high school and 90% went on to college (compare that with the tragic 48% high-school graduation rate for male Hispanics in O.C.); 83% of Littles say that their Big instilled values and principles that have benefited them for a lifetime; Littles are 52% less likely to skip school; Littles are 46% less likely to use drugs; and 27% less likely to

use alcohol.

Most Littles also develop better relationships with their families, school mates, and teachers, become more confident and sociable, gain self esteem, develop goals and ambition in life, and strive for (and achieve) career goals that they would not have otherwise thought possible.

### How You Can Help

There are hundreds of Littles on the waiting list, desperate to bond with role models just

like you.

As lawyers, you have a wealth of invaluable knowledge, professionalism, life experience, wisdom, and values to impart to Littles. The most profound way to help a Little is to establish a Big-Little relationship. But there are numerous ways to get involved in changing a Little's life and to help Big Brothers Big Sisters.

**Tutoring.** A great way for lawyers to help Littles! You may visit a school once a week to tutor a child in a variety of subject matters, such as reading and math.

**"Big for a Day."** Can't commit to a year? How about just one day? Events are held at places like Knott's Berry Farm and Boomers!, where volunteers are matched with Littles (those who are on the waiting list for a permanent Big).

**Fund-Raising.** Numerous events are held throughout the year, including a Mardis Gras gala party (held at Disneyland's Ralph Brennan's *Jazz Kitchen*); a Young Professionals Sunset Cruise; a Golf Tournament; wine tastings and the annual Gourmet Dinner.

Big Brothers Big Sisters teaches us all that we each have the power to dramatically change a child's life for the better. Little hands are reaching out. Will your Big hand reach for the challenge?

Interested in changing a Little one's life forever? In being a mentor to a child who will never forget the impact you made on his or her life, or financially supporting matches? Contact Big Brothers Big Sisters at 714.544.7773, 14131 Yorba Street, Suite 200, Tustin, CA 92780.



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