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Group seeks men to befriend boys

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Some potential volunteers may be scared off by the “mentor” label

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The Register-Guard

Posted to Web: **Sunday, Aug 8, 2010 11:51PM**

Appeared in print: **Monday, Aug 9, 2010, page B2**

Youth organizations say more men don't volunteer to mentor boys in need because they think they don't have the time or aren't up to the job. But Ben Sappington suspects part of the problem is simply the word “mentor.”

“The ‘mentor’ word is scary,” said Sappington, 25, of Eugene. “But ‘friend’ isn't as scary. These kids just need a dependable friend.”

A local youth organization is putting the call out for scores of men like Sappington, who became a mentor — or friend — to an 11-year-old boy last year.

It's called “90 men in 90 days,” and it's not the latest brainstorm for a reality TV series. It's an effort by Committed Partners For Youth/Big Brothers Big Sisters of Lane County to recruit 90 men between July and September to become mentors for boys who could use a little male companionship.

Historically, the organization has struggled to meet the needs of boys due to a shortage of male volunteers, spokeswoman Anne Borland said. Female volunteers can be matched with boys or girls, but male volunteers are matched only with boys.

Of 65 youths on the group's waiting list for a Big Brother or Big Sister, 50 are boys, said Patti Hansen, volunteer manager. Some boys have waited for more than a year for a Big Brother.

“There's a huge fright factor with men — they think it takes more from them than they have, and that's just not true,” Borland said. “They just have to be themselves and be a friend.”

Mentoring is an important topic for minority groups, and consultants hired by Lane County last year said the Department of Youth Services should do more with Committed Partners for Youth and others to find mentors.

The youth organization continues to collaborate with the department and others to find mentors for youth inside or outside the juvenile justice system, said Jenny Stern-Carusone, program director.

Committed Partners for Youth/Big Brothers Big Sisters of Lane County serves youth ages 7 through 17 through partnerships with elementary schools, middle schools and the juvenile court system.

The nonprofit agency said its programs help young people decrease use of drugs and alcohol, reduce negative peer relationships, increase school attendance and increase feelings of self-worth.

Mentors and boys should spend 12 to 15 hours together per month during the first year, the group advises.

Sappington, a banking assistant with Pacific Continental Bank of Eugene, said he had concerns about becoming a Big Brother because he didn't think he'd have the time.

He was surprised to learn that his new friend, Jordin, was equally entertained whether the two went to a baseball game or just out for groceries.

“You think, ‘This is going to be such a burden,’ ” Sappington said. “But it really is as simple as spending an hour together has such a profound impact.”

Sappington has seen improvement in Jordin’s anger management skills and general behavior. For his part, Jordin just looks forward to the time he spends each week with his Big Brother.

“We go to Ems games, basketball games, we go swimming at the Downtown Athletic Club,” Jordin said. “Knowing that it’s going to happen, it makes me happy.”

MEN WANTED

What: Committed Partners for Youth seeks 90 men to mentor local boys

How much time: Mentors and boys should spend 12 to 15 hours together per month during the first year

Responsibilities: Mentors are encouraged simply to have fun with their young friends, as opposed to providing counseling or education

For more information: Visit www.committedpartners.org or call Patti Hansen, 541-344-0833, Ext. 105

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