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Big Brothers, Big Sisters give guiding hand

By Rina Baraz Nehdar Special to the Acorn



IRIS SMOOT/Acorn Newspapers ALL IN THE FAMILY- From left, Pam Vaznaian, Matthew Vaznaian and Scott Tiano say they developed a lasting bond thanks to the Jewish Big Brothers and Big Sisters program.

Smiling warmly over a Saturday morning cup of coffee at a Calabasas Starbucks, Scott Tiano, Matthew Vaznaian and Matthew's mom, Pam Vaznaian of Reseda recently reunited. The three were first brought together more than 10 years ago as participants in the Jewish Big Brother, Big Sister program.

"Other than deciding who I was going to marry," said Tiano, 36, "the decision to become a Big Brother has been the best decision of my life."

Vaznaian, now 20, can hardly be considered a "Little" (the fond name given to kids in the

JBBBS program) any more. The once-shy 10-year-old blossomed under Tiano's tutelage into a soft-spoken young man, full of conviction.

Vaznaian sat classically adorned in the uniform of today's cool youth with earring studs and a goatee. He is one of the youngest people to hold the position of program assistant at Camp JCA Shalom. Today, he is a mentor himself, guiding kids who look up to him as a role model.

"It makes me feel like I've accomplished something," said Vaznaian, "If everyone wants to make a difference in this world, I know that I've made that difference on numerous occasions to the next generation."

Vaznaian said Tiano became "the mortar" that set the foundation for his strong moral fiber.

"He's helping these kids in the same way that I may have helped him," said Tiano, full of paternal pride.

Vaznaian is enrolled at Pierce College and plans to transfer next year to a four-year university with another benefit he earned from the JBBBS program: a financial scholarship.

Ten years ago, Pam Vaznaian brought her son to JBBBS, an agency that promotes mentoring partnerships between children from primarily single-parent homes, and professionals within the community. At the time, Vaznaian did not have a relationship with his biological father.

Vaznaian had misgivings about sending her son off to interact with a total stranger. But she said, "Because it was a Jewish organization, I became more at ease."

Tiano became a volunteer at the JBBBS program thanks to his uncle, Karl Sussman, a past JBBBS president and a "Big" to six Littles.

"He kept pressuring me and I kept telling him how busy I was," Tiano said.

At the time, Tiano worked as a producer of independent films. He said it was the busiest time of his life. Then one night at a family party, talking with his uncle, he realized, "It doesn't matter how busy you are. You're always going to be busy. In fact, you'll get busier as life goes on."

Tiano said the motivation for his decision was gratitude. "I was really lucky to have come from a great family and my dad has always been a mentor to me. I just wanted to give something back."

So he called JBBBS and started the process to become a Big Brother. He underwent a series of psychological profiles with an agency social worker to assess his mental aptitude for the program. He was given a criminal background check through Live Scan, a screening program run by the Department of Justice. It is the same screening program used for all government employees.

Next, JBBBS needed to determine Tiano's geographical stability, not wanting to match him with a Little only to have him abandon the Little by moving away shortly thereafter. Tiano wasn't sure at the time if he'd be going anywhere, but it turned out that when he did move, it was closer to Vaznaian.

JBBBS placed him with a "match specialist" whose job was to pair participants who shared similar interests and geographic proximity.

She offered him a choice between two likely Littles. One lived close to where Tiano resided at the time, on the Westside. The other one was "way out in the Valley where I'd have to drive over the 405 and bring my passport," said Tiano, who eventually decided that although he hadn't even met him, Matthew sounded like a better match.

JBBBS told Tiano the time commitment would be five hours every other week.

The first thing that give Tiano pause was the financial commitment. JBBBS said he might have to pay about \$40-50 per outing and although life was very busy for Tiano, his independent projects weren't lucrative. He was concerned, but discovered that the best outings didn't really involve spending any money.

"Going out to Vasquez Rocks, remember that?" Tiano asked Vaznaian. He received an easy, nodding grin in return.

"Teaching him skateboarding. Those were the best times," Tiano said. "He helped me remember what it was like to be a kid again. There are few guarantees in life. But I can guarantee that if someone is considering becoming a Big Brother (or Big Sister), it will have a positive impact on their life."

Vaznaian attributes his skills as a musician and an athlete to his relationship with Tiano.

"I don't know if these things were inherent but I worked on these things with Scott and especially the musical aspect. I remember we were sitting in his car one day and he asked me what I wanted to do, if I wanted to learn anything. And I had seen Scott playing music as a drummer so I told him, 'I want to learn how to play drums.'"

Most of the Jewish kids living in the 12,000 single-parent homes in Los Angeles County aren't as lucky as Matthew Vaznaian. Many grow up without the parental guidance they need, only to find themselves getting involved in drugs and gangs to gain feelings of acceptance.

Kids who participate in the Big Brother, Big Sister programs are 76 percent less likely to use alcohol and drugs or get caught up in gangs and violence, and 84 percent report higher levels of self-esteem, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Big Brother, Big Sister participants also have a lower incidence of teen pregnancy, do better in school, and have a greater awareness of their educational and career options.

Founded in 1915, JBBBS is one of 26 Big Brother, Big Sister organizations nationwide. JBBBS served 2,300 children this year.

The organization works with children regardless of race, religion or ability to pay.

Programs include summer camps, school-based mentoring, scholarships, sports and arts buddies and outdoor education.

To get involved with JBBBS, call Johanna at (323) 761-8675 or go online to www.jbbbsla.org.