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## **Big gift aims to encourage volunteerism**

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Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Arizona, a children's charity and mentorship program, received the largest donation in its 50-year history last week - a \$100,000 gift from the Daron and Ron Barness Family Foundation.

"Ron and Daron want to get out to organizations that make a strong impact in helping children in the community," said Evan Bernstein, executive director for the Barness Foundation. "Big Brother Big Sisters does (that) very well in the Valley."

The donation will help cover general operating expenses for the nonprofit organization and increase staff slightly, after financial setbacks over the last two years resulted in a workforce reduction of 25 percent.

Brian Hassett, president of BBBS of Central Arizona, hopes that the Barnesses' generosity and confidence in BBBS will help stimulate greater gift-giving within the community.

"Ron and Daron have raised the bar a little higher," he said. "It helps generate interest in what we're doing."

Hassett hopes that this interest will translate not only into dollars but, more importantly, into widespread volunteerism, especially within the Jewish community.

According to Hassett, more and more Jewish mothers are requesting Jewish big brothers for their children. What started as a few requests has grown to about 20 in a matter of weeks, he said. The figure, though only a fraction of the 1,100 Valley children waiting for a "big," is expected to grow rapidly as the Jewish community learns that BBBS is looking for Jewish "bigs."

The "bigs" serve as mentors to the children.

Hassett said he isn't surprised by the sudden demand for Jewish "bigs."

"We had sort of a one-size-fits-all recruitment strategy, and it just doesn't work that way," Hassett said. "If Jewish moms have this need, we want to be more inclusive."

The increased demand for Jewish "bigs" has prompted BBBS to reach out to other faith-based communities as well, starting with local Baptists.

In addition to the Barnesses' \$100,000 donation, BBBS of Central Arizona has been offered a challenge grant by the Virginia Piper Trust Foundation.

According to Marilee Dal Pra, a program officer for the Piper foundation, it pledged \$200,000 over a period of two years to BBBS of Central Arizona if Hassett could raise an initial \$100,000.

The Barness donation would have met that criterion. But, Hassett said, "I didn't want one donation to take care of the problem for us."

Instead, he opted to apply only \$20,000 of the Barness donation to the Piper challenge, hoping that the Barnesses' generosity will encourage other members of the community to raise the remaining \$80,000 necessary to meet the challenge.

"Ron and Daron have taken it to a new level," Hassett said. "They've helped us with a portion of a match. ... Now I'm

going to our friends in the community, saying that if they haven't already given help, or even if they have, their donation will be matched dollar for dollar."

With an annual budget of about \$2.7 million, which according to Hassett is small compared with other similar agencies, BBBS relies heavily on outside contributions.

"It's our 50th birthday this year," Hassett said, "and we're serving about 2,500 kids when we should be serving 5,000. ... We need to add capacity."

The \$200,000 Piper grant, along with the Barnes donation, will allow BBBS to provide service to about 200 more youths, at about \$1,000 each, and hire more caseworkers, which would decrease each worker's workload from about 120 cases each to about 90.

The \$1,000-per-child cost includes organizational operating costs as well the cost of fingerprint clearance and background checks for all BBBS volunteers.

"It's expensive," Hassett said, "but number one, we have to protect the children."

For Hassett, the expense is well worth the result.

"We have outcomes here," he said. "Kids who go through our program are less likely to use alcohol, skip school, commit acts of violence, get pregnant. ... In one study, 62 percent of kids had a (grade point average) increase after six months in the program."

Despite previous financial setbacks, Hassett said the agency has plans for growth, including a program for children of incarcerated parents - 28,000 of whom reside in Maricopa County alone.

As for the 1,100 kids still waiting for a "big," volunteers are crucial, and exposure is key.

"People don't know what we do," Hassett said. "They think we're the Boys and Girls Club. Others just think that volunteering would take up too much of their time, when it could be just four hours a month, at most."

In fact, BBBS offers volunteers numerous ways to get involved, with varying levels of commitment. The traditional program requires a "big" to get together with his little brother a minimum of two to four times a month, while the Lunch Buddy program allows "bigs" to give up two to four lunch hours a month to spend time with a student at school.

Perhaps more than money, Hassett would like people to donate their time to BBBS, especially young men. Besides the shortage of Jewish "bigs," BBBS currently has a large shortage of big brothers in general, as women are much more likely to volunteer than men.

He would also like to see more prominent figures in the community volunteering, even if only for a few hours a month.

Ultimately, Hassett hopes to get people to start thinking, as he says, "If a city councilman has time to do this, maybe I do."

To volunteer with BBBS, or to make a gift, visit [www.bbbsaz.org](http://www.bbbsaz.org).