



Big brother Troy Martin, right, watches his little brother, Tre, learn the ropes at the Red Barn climbing wall.

Big ideas

RIT students learn the rewards of mentoring

The sense of accomplishment is obvious from the smile on 13-year-old Treland's face. The seventh grader from suburban Rochester is quickly getting the hang – so to speak – of the rock-climbing surface inside RIT's Red Barn.

"They (the rubberized grips) don't have to be that big," he explains, "but as long as they have a hole, you can stick your finger inside and get a grip on it."

RIT's Troy Martin, a second-year mechanical engineering student, can't help but smile himself watching Treland – or Tre – master this latest challenge. The two of them teamed up last February as part of a pilot program initiated by Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Rochester. The effort – matching "little brothers and sisters" with RIT student mentors – provides each pair with the opportunity for one-on-one interaction during twice monthly gatherings on campus.

Martin and Tre have shared a variety of activities, from playing with remote-controlled cars to a building campfire. But it

was a recent game of pool that really got his big brother's attention.

"Yeah, he beat my butt on that one,"

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Jeff Newland, Big Brothers Big Sisters executive director

recalls Martin with a laugh. "I said, 'Do you know how to play pool?' He said, 'Barely.' I think he was pulling my leg because he wiped me out."

This new campus-based Big Brothers Big Sisters program was developed in collaboration with Phyllis Walker, director of RIT's Community Service Office, and Helen Gormont, former Big Brothers Big Sisters coordinator of volunteers. Gormont's participation at previous RIT volunteer fairs frequently sparked interest from students wanting to lend their time and support to the agency.

"She'd get a significant number of students who wanted to help," recalls Walker, "but the lack of transportation and the challenges of scheduling activities around the quarter system didn't meet the needs of our students."

So Walker and Gormont considered the potential of bringing "Littles," ranging in

age from 10 to 16, to campus as a way to establish relationships with RIT student mentors. These "Bigs" would be in a position to expose youngsters to the benefits of college life, and parents and guardians could take comfort in knowing their children were enjoying activities in a safe environment.

Youngsters who participate in the Big Brothers Big Sisters consistently exhibit behaviors highlighting the favorable impact of professionally supported mentoring. According to the agency, 96 percent of Littles do well in school, 97 percent avoid drug and alcohol use and 97 percent avoid behavior that results in early parenting.

Tapping into RIT's large student body offers tremendous potential for the organization to enhance its impact. Many local children who are accepted into the program may wait an extended period before an appropriate match is found.

"Bringing a program like this to a close-knit community like RIT provides the opportunity to create a positive buzz," says Jeff Newland, Big Brothers Big Sisters executive director. "When people hear how easy, fun and rewarding being an RIT Big is, they want to learn more, and they get involved. As a result, we grow to reach more children even faster."

Coordinators are in the process of signing on more RIT student volunteers to

become Bigs, planning to have up to 20 campus-based matches. The organization hopes RIT's success will serve as a model for similar programs at the other Rochester-area colleges and universities.

Troy Martin measures success through the development of one child. "From what I've seen, Tre is a lot more outgoing, a lot more self-confident, and I can only expect that will help him in school, with friends and other social situations."

After an hour of traversing the rugged terrain of the Red Barn, Tre playfully expresses his exhaustion by falling backward onto a cushioned matt. He acknowledges that this experience, and the other times spent with his big brother, is helping him reach new heights – literally and figuratively.

"There are different things I can do that I didn't think I could. I didn't think I could do this."

Paul Stella

For more information

To learn more about Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Rochester, call 585-442-2250 or visit www.beabig.org