

Big Brothers Big Sisters has the right formula

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What does it take to help someone beat the odds and change his life?

Having a mentor through Big Brothers Big Sisters tipped the scales for Ben Gordon.

Ben's an intelligent and determined man. He earned the 2007 Goldwater Scholarship, given to America's most elite science students, on his own merits.

Still, he had to overcome some incredible hurdles to get where he is today. And helping Ben to surmount those obstacles was his Big Brother, Pete Simonson.

When he was 12, Ben came to Iowa City from Chicago with his mom and younger sister. His mom worked hard to teach and encourage Ben to take his education seriously. She also contacted Big Brothers Big Sisters to get Ben matched with a Big Brother.

Pete and Ben were introduced to each other in 1993 and spent the next three years doing everyday activities together. They played basketball and shared meals. They built a friendship.

When Ben was 15, his mother died after a long battle with congestive heart failure and asthma. Ben had to move to live with a half-brother in Des Moines.

Ben got a job to help support his family. He struggled to attend college, dropping out after a year. The bright future that Ben's mom had dreamt for him seemed out of reach.

Over the years, Ben and Pete continued to stay in touch. Pete graduated with his Ph.D. and moved to Pittsburgh to become a professor. When he learned that his Little Brother's own academic progress had stalled, Pete made Ben a life-changing offer:

"Come live with me and my family. Attend college here, at the University of Pittsburgh."

Because professors' children receive free tuition, Pete armed himself with a letter of support from our agency and petitioned his employer for an exception. Remarkably, the university agreed --their Big Brothers Big Sisters relationship qualified Ben as Pete's dependant.

Ben seized his renewed opportunity. He excelled as an engineering student, graduating at the top of his class before continuing on to advanced studies. Today, Ben continues to set the pace for his fellow scientists. It's an inspiration to be part of his remarkable story.

Relationships like the one shared by Ben and Pete are common at Big Brothers Big Sisters. Of course, Ben and Pete's journey is extraordinary. But the greatest gift Pete offered to Ben wasn't free college.

The real difference Pete made in Ben's life was that no matter what, Ben had another person in his corner. Pete rooted him on and encouraged his success. Like all of our mentoring relationships, they built their friendship through simple, shared moments.

At Big Brothers Big Sisters, our volunteers are investing their time wisely. They're taking an interest in a child in need -- and gaining a friend of their own in the process. They are creating opportunities, expanding families' resources.

Together, we're helping more children like Ben beat the odds.



With the help of Pete Simonson, right, Ben Gordon earned the 2007 Goldwater Scholarship, given to America's most elite science students. Simonson became Gordon's Big Brother in 1993 when Gordon came to Iowa City from Chicago. (Special to the Press-Citizen)