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## **Big Brothers Big Sisters of Mercer Seeks “Great Guys” as Youth Mentors**

*By Wendy Greenberg*

The pandemic has had a significant effect on volunteerism, and Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) of Mercer County is no exception.

The organization, based in Trenton, creates and supports one-to-one mentoring relationships by matching underserved youths ages 6-18 with caring adult mentors. The Mercer County Chapter was founded in 1973, and is affiliated with the national organization which was founded in 1904.

BBBS is looking at several ways to recruit in its “Great Guys Mentor” campaign, and also to raise awareness about the need for male mentors to become “Bigs,” as they call the mentors.

“We know that the pandemic has made it more difficult for people to volunteer, but we also know that there are many ‘Great Guys’ out there who want to make a difference,” said Tara Belford, interim executive director. “We want to show them that they have the power to positively influence a child’s life by reinforcing and encouraging a young person’s better instincts. And that it doesn’t take a huge time commitment but comes with amazing rewards.”

One event is a recruiting table at its Annual Spring Picnic on Thursday, June 15 at Veterans Park at the Court Games Pavilion South from 5 p.m. to sunset.

Belford added that “it’s always a challenge recruiting volunteers,” and “right now there is an extreme lack of male volunteers. People who have gone back to work since the pandemic are catching up, and don’t have a lot of free time.” She suggested coming to the picnic and picking up an application. Applicants will be entered into a prize drawing.

According to Director of Advancement Loraine Goodman, the organization matched 600 mentors and youths a year prior to the pandemic. This past year there have been just under 300 matches and 47 children are on the waiting list for mentors, 37 of whom are young males, some of whom have been on the list for more than a year.

Although most people are aware of the community template, where mentors visit with their “matches” for community-based activities, a work-based program, where Trenton Central High School students were exposed to various workplaces, lost two sites because of remote work during the pandemic. A school-based program where high school and college students were matched with elementary school students, as both tutors and friends, visited schools.

“Those programs were hard hit,” said Goodman. “The organization is building those back up.”

“Exacerbating the shortage of mentors, more youths signed up to be mentored during the pandemic, and the waiting list got longer,” said Belford.

The organization has launched a social media campaign, and is also doing outreach to local businesses, churches, faith-based organizations, sports groups, and community organizations.

According to BBBS, a large percentage of youths who are mentored are less likely to skip school, and less likely to begin using illegal drugs. The mentors range in age from their 20s to their 60s and beyond.

Most mentees in Mercer County live in Trenton, and others live in Lawrence Township, Hamilton, Princeton, East Windsor, and Ewing. Most are 5-10 years old.

The organization does not ask a lot of time be spent — five hours a month over a year — but asks for a year-long commitment for youths who have seen a lot of transition in their lives.

“The commitment is small but it can have a huge impact,” said Goodman.

More information, and instructions for applying, can be found at [mercerbbbs.org](https://mercerbbbs.org).

<https://www.towntopics.com/wordpress/2023/06/14/big-brothers-big-sisters-of-mercer-seeks-great-guys-as-youth-mentors/>