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## Appreciating Bermuda's mentors



By Ren Hill

Two helping organisations are joining together today to recognise those who strive to make a difference in the lives of Bermuda's young people mentors.

The annual celebration of these community helpers is set to take place at Par-La-Ville Park today between 12.30 and 2 p.m., and it will involve Big Brothers and Big Sisters (BBBS) of Bermuda and YouthNet.

Organisers are expecting roughly 250 people to attend Mentors Day which will also be marked with similar events around the world.

BBBS executive director Esme Williams told *The Royal Gazette* that Mentors Day was established in the early 1990s.

It gives young people and agencies a chance to say thanks, she said.

The aim of the event is to say thank you to the mentors for the time they take to invest in someone else's life. It lets the public know that these individuals have dedicated their time in the life of a youngster.

As BBBS enters its 29th year of service in Bermuda, Ms Williams said the role of adults who take the time to Big has never been more important.

Children are usually referred to the BBBS of Bermuda, she said.

They cannot pick up an application themselves, so they may be referred by a school counsellor, or parents hear about it and decide that their child needs a mentor to help change or turn their lives around. We also get referrals from the Family Centre, who feel like a Big Brother or Big Sister might be good in a child's life.

Many of the youngsters in BBBS come from single parent homes, she added, but that is not to suggest that these single parents are uncaring often that is far from the case.

They have a lot of other issues that they have to deal and contend with, Ms Williams said. These mothers want the best for their children but because of constraints like just trying to make a living don't always have the time to put in.

They are caring mothers and sometimes they feel that another person would make a difference in that child's life.

The **big**s and **little**s are matched on many different aspects of both personality and interests, she added, and often these matches lead to lifelong close relationships.

Sometimes people feel that they can't offer anything, but as an older man or woman you have a wealth of experience and knowledge to share with and to guide a youngster, Ms Williams said.

So, we are open to anyone age 21 years and up.

Many **little**s stay in the BBBS programme until age 18, she added, and themselves move on to the role of **big**s after they reach the age of 21.

Generally what happens at 18, is the friendships become life-long relationships with the **Big**, because once you have that bond it continues, she said. If we can keep this relationship going and keep the person as a part of their lives it is so important and rewarding.

The commitment to be a Big Brother or Big Sister is a serious one, however.

We don't want people to make a commitment and then have to break it, because these children have always known disappointment, especially with our boys, said Ms Williams.

That is why we look at the ability to make a commitment, to spend time and establish a relationship with this child.

It is very critical because you don't want to do any more damage.

Meanwhile YouthNet, which was founded 11 years ago in Bermuda and runs a school-based mentoring programme, now has 410 mentors working in the field in Bermuda.

And its executive director, Clare Mello, said a surprisingly high proportion of those mentors are students themselves helping other students.

I think today there is a lot of negativity surrounding young people but we have about 173 17-year-olds who are our peer mentors, she said. They are probably serving close to 200 kids because both adult and peer mentors have more than one mentee.

Good mentors have to be open-minded about their roles, Ms Mello suggested.

I would have to say flexibility, certainly a willingness to embrace young people and to take your glasses of preconception off and just embrace this person for who they are, she said of the traits of a good mentor. Also be willing to learn from this person and to role model good positive behaviours. [They should also have] a willingness to share and listen because it is hugely rewarding. It puts a jump in your step when you come from a meeting.

YouthNet was started by former Ernst & Young employee Cornell Fubler and the mentoring group still benefits from a close relationship with the accounting firm.

[Cornell Fubler] went away to school on a scholarship from the Rotary Club and, when he came back, he recruited young black males, because he felt that he had benefited from having a mentor, said Ms Mello of the group's founding.

So he went out and got some original guys and some are still on the board today.

E&Y is one of our primary sponsors and they house us in their offices. We are a part of their family and they are certainly a part of ours. They give us office space and technical support and it is a wonderful arena to work in, so they are like our mentor.

In addition to celebrating those already working with their organisations, both executive directors have appealed for more male volunteers to join.

◆We have more young boys in our agency and so we are always in need of male volunteers,◆ Ms Williams said of BBBS. ◆We always need more ladies, but now our unmatched ◆littles◆ are boys. We had about 50 (unmatched littles), but we have made some matches.◆

And Ms Mello said that YouthNet too is searching for more male mentors, although she pointed out that the organisation has had much success with having cross-gender mentoring arrangements.

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For more information on BBBS please call 232-2802 and for more information on YouthNet you can contact 294-5300.

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