

First, a hat, then it was all heart

BILL NEMITZ April 19, 2009

It began with a Celtics hat.

On March 30, 1998, Skip Conley, then 44, shook hands with Tom MacMillan, then 11, and handed him the hat as an ice breaker.

"I'm your new Big Brother," Skip said as Tom's single mother, Cathy, looked on.

Tom, who didn't see much of his father, didn't have a lot of friends and spent way too much of his time alone, found it all "a little weird." But the guy did bring a Celtics hat, and Tom did love the Celtics

And so it began.

Tom's 22 now and next month will don his cap and gown for the commencement ceremony at Clark University in Worcester, Mass.

Cathy MacMillan, a devoted mother if ever there was one, died of cancer three weeks ago at Maine Medical Center with a devastated Tom at her side.

And Skip?

He was there too. As he always will be.

"When I started this thing 11 years ago, if I'd known it would ever have gotten to this, it absolutely would have blown me away," Skip said last week. "It's been very, very, very rewarding for me."

We all hear from time to time about Big Brothers/Big Sisters and how they match "Bigs" (volunteer adults willing to fill a void in a kid's life) with "Littles" (boys and girls who, through no fault of their own, could use an adult mentor and friend).

What we don't often hear is how profoundly a good match can change lives.

Skip and Tom were, by any measure, a good match.

"If only we had more Skips," said Sam Beal, executive director of Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Southern Maine, where 30-40 kids await mentors at any given time. Most of them, Beal said, are boys like Tom – living with a single mother and in serious need of a little "guy time."

TALKING AND TEACHING

Skip, a retired postal worker, decided to join Big Brothers/Big Sisters after his own son (whom he'd raised as a single father) went off to serve in the Air Force. Recently remarried and looking for a way to help out his community, he went through the program's rigorous background check and training and suddenly there he was watching an 11-year-old boy trying on his new Celtics hat.

"Tom's a yapper," Skip said with a smile. "As soon as I met him that day at his mom's apartment (in Portland's East Deering neighborhood), he started yapping like you would not believe."

In the weeks, then months, then years that followed, they talked about everything – sports, school, girls, you name it.

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And they did just about everything – played baseball, shot hoops, hit the miniature golf circuit, went to movies, had barbecues in Skip's backyard, drove down to Boston to see the Celtics, the Red Sox ...

"Making new memories," Skip said. "That's what I always call it – making new memories." Here's one: Tom is playing in a Little League game. It's extra innings, two runners on and guess who's at the plate?

Skip, sitting in the stands as always, is praying, "Let him get a hit, let him get a hit"

Tom does. It's a game-winner. And as he rounds second base, his eyes lock on Skip for what seems like forever.

"His face was just beaming," Skip recalled. "He'll never forget that day. Nor will I. He was just so happy, so happy."

Here's another: Tom wants to play Little Ladd football, but his mom can't afford the equipment. So Skip calls up a buddy who's well connected to youth football, and explains the situation.

"Send him over to me," the buddy says. "I'll take care of him."

A few years later, a much bigger Tom starred as an offensive lineman for the Portland High School Bulldogs. Skip never missed a game.

"I didn't have a lot of confidence when I was younger," Tom said by telephone from Clark University last week. "Skip taught me that everything is possible. There was nothing I couldn't do."

As a freshman in high school, Tom joined the Portland...

Project at the Seeds of Peace Camp in Otisfield, which brings Maine teens together with peers from trouble spots all over the world to explore things like conflict resolution and tolerance and cultural understanding.

For three straight summers, Tom attended Seeds of Peace as a camper. Then, with Skip cheering him on, he returned for a fourth year as a counselor.

Around the same time, Tom turned 18 – meaning he was no longer eligible for the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program.

No matter.

"We're Big Brother and Little Brother for life," said Skip. "I've told my family that when I die, he'll be listed as one of my surviving relatives. That's how much he means to me."

COURAGE AND COMFORT

Several times over the past four years, Skip drove down to visit Tom at Clark University. The onetime young kid who never left the house soon will collect his bachelor's degree in International Development.

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Skip also looked on in awe as Tom, using the money he's saved from various part-time jobs, traveled to Kosovo, Macedonia, Egypt and Israel to reunite with old friends from Seeds of Peace.

"All by himself! All by himself!" Skip said. "I wouldn't have had the guts to do that when I was that age. I wouldn't even do it today!"

A year ago, Tom even spent a semester abroad in the southern Africa country of Namibia – and that's where this story gets painful. While he was away, his mother was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

He wanted to come home immediately, but Cathy told him to stay. And when his grief overwhelmed him from time to time, he called Skip.

"I tried to just give him the advice I'd always used on myself," Skip said. "Hang in there. Be strong. Come home and see what happens."

One evening last fall, Tom called Skip in full meltdown. Cathy had taken a turn for the worse and this time, Tom absolutely had to be with her.

Less than three hours later, Skip was at Tom's door in Worcester.

"He cried the whole way home, just talking about his mom," Skip said. "He just wanted to be home with his mom."

Cathy had always hoped that she'd live to see Tom graduate from college. But as it became clear last month that she was in her final days, a social worker at Maine Medical Center suggested that they hold a "mock graduation" in Cathy's hospital room.

Tom asked Skip to present the diploma because, as he put it, "He's been my go-to guy through all of this."

Skip said a few words and, as Tom's relatives blinked back tears, handed him the makeshift diploma. Then he gave Cathy a Clark University key chain he'd picked up over the years – along with a gold pin symbolizing a mother and son.

"You are the key to Tom's heart," he told Cathy. "You are his everything."

Cathy passed away a week later.

Tom still has trouble talking about it. But he did promise his mother that when he came back to Maine this summer – while he's walking with his class at Clark next month, he still needs to take a language course at the University of Southern Maine to fulfill a degree requirement – he'll move in with Skip and his wife, Jodie.

"I know she took great comfort in that," Tom said, his voice breaking. "There are three people responsible for me being where I am today, my grandmother, my mom and Skip."

'HERE WE GO AGAIN'

This weekend is a busy one for Skip.

Saturday morning, he drove down to Boston with tickets to the Celtics playoff series against the Chicago Bulls. Waiting for him, as always, was Tom.

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"It's my first-ever playoff game," Tom said. "I can't wait."

Then this afternoon, Skip will head for the Cumberland County Civic Center to watch the Portland Pirates play in their playoff series against Providence. At his side this time will be an 8-year-old boy named Charlie.

A few months ago, you see, Skip...

showed up at Charlie's house in Portland, stuck out his hand and said, "Hi, I'm your new Big Brother."

Looking at a recent picture of him and Charlie playing hockey behind Deering High School, Skip shook his head and smiled.

"Here we go again," he said.

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