

Sunset Commission Meeting

April 25, 2018

Testimony of

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Texas Testimony

4800 Manor Road, Bldg. K Austin, TX 78723

www.bigmentoring.org

Good Morning Commissioners and Guest:

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before you this morning. My name is Lorie Barzano. I serve as the Grants Manager for Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Texas and speak today in support of the Texas Veterans Commission and the valuable work accomplished by the Commission and Fund for Veterans Assistance.

Although Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) of Central Texas does not currently receive funding from the Texas Veterans Commission, our agency believes the programs supported by the Veterans Commission remain vital to the health and well-being of veterans and their families living in Texas.

In the past, Big Brothers Big Sisters has received funding through the Veterans Commission's Fund for Veterans Assistance to support our agency's provision of one-to-one mentoring services for veterans, their children, and surviving spouses dealing with the challenges of single parenthood. Our work with the Veterans Commission has proven the Commission serves an important need of veterans and their families. The Veterans Commission operates meeting every standard of efficiency, effectiveness, and professionalism. Based on our direct experience with the Veterans Commission, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Texas strongly supports the continued work of the Texas Veterans Commission.

Thank you.



**Big Brothers Big Sisters
of Central Texas**

BIG Stories

To Protect and Serve

Veterans are notably resourceful and often self-reliant. There are times, however, when even America's finest can use some extra help. Natasha Taylor, a single mom and Army veteran, found that support through Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Texas and a Big Brother for her son.

"They've been matched since my son was in 9th grade," Natasha said. "Hickman needed a male role model in his life. A father figure. He's always been a good kid, but once he was matched with Sean, I saw a tremendous change. He was more positive. It was like a big weight had been lifted off him."

Hickman's father has not been in his life at all. "His father didn't contact him on his birthday last week," Natasha added. "Sean did."

"One of the things I appreciate most is the time Sean spends with Hickman," Natasha continued. "He's gone to football games, basketball games, and wrestling matches. He's been such a blessing to my family."

The match does impact the whole family. Natasha is a single mom raising Hickman and a young daughter while working. She is also trying to advance her career by going back to college.

"Our match helps Natasha by providing Hickman with a male friend who, while older, is still close enough in age to understand what he's going through," Sean explained. "High school isn't easy. You need people you can count on to be there for you regularly, and who understand and sympathize. Natasha has a lot on her plate. I'm happy to support Hickman and, if nothing else, provide a fun escape from the normal routine of high school life."

Natasha is a 10-year army veteran who was medically and honorably discharged from the service. Following in his mom's military footsteps, Hickman is enrolled in his high school's ROTC program. He plans to join the Air Force upon graduation.

Veterans' needs are unique. Recognizing this, BBBS offers mentoring services to the children of veterans. The agency also actively recruits veterans to serve as Big Brothers and Sisters.

"Members of military families are not always home due to trainings, deployments, duty assignments, field exercises and more," said Saul Espinoza, a veteran himself and a BBBS enrollment specialist. "This can be particularly stressful. A mentor can provide friendship, as well as a sense of stability, security and trust. A Big Brother or Sister can serve as an additional resource and role model when a member of the family is away."



Big Brother Sean, Natasha and Hickman

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www.BigMentoring.org • info@BigMentoring.org • 512.472.5437

Having a Big Brother in his life proved critical for Hickman when he experienced a racist incident at his high school – a comment from a fellow ROTC member. “Hickman kept it to himself for about 3 months,” Natasha said. “When I found out about it, I got right on the phone with Sean.”

“Hickman and I discussed what had happened,” Sean said. “We talked about how unfair and unfortunate it is that racism exists. More than anything, I affirmed that he had done the right thing by not retaliating, and I told him I was proud of him, which I very much am. It would have been easy and understandable for Hickman to have lashed out, but he kept his composure and brought the incident to the attention of the proper authorities.”

According to Natasha, each outing Sean and Hickman have together just “steps it up” for Hickman. She laughs about the days Sean picks Hickman up from school. “Kids look at them and ask Hickman ‘Who is that?’ and he just says ‘My brother,’ and leaves it at that.”

“Because Hickman is African-American and Sean is Caucasian, the kids look at him and wonder what’s going on. But I’m glad Sean is not African-American because many people are all about their race and my children are not raised that way. We’re military, and in the service you see all races. I want my son to continue to like everybody.”

Sean sees himself gaining as much from the match as his Little Brother. “Hickman is a great guy. I enjoy hanging out and joking around with him, whether we’re just grabbing a quick bite to eat or going to a mall or arcade. He has an awesome sense of humor and we laugh constantly. He’s one of the most respectful people I’ve ever met. He thanks me and tells me he had a good time every time we hang out, and I can tell it’s sincere. I enjoy our time together.”

One event Natasha particularly remembers occurred after a trip she, Hickman, and her daughter had taken to Galveston. “On the trip Hickman saw a two-door BMW that is his dream car,” Natasha recalled. “He posed by the car and we took pictures. Then Hickman told Sean about it. Three weeks later Sean picked Hickman up in the exact same car. Hickman was shocked. It turns out Sean’s dad owned the same kind of BMW and Sean had borrowed it just to take Hickman for a ride.”

“Hickman came back from that ride beaming,” Natasha added. “When I say there’s been nothing but good from this match, I try not to tear up. I couldn’t ask for a better Big Brother for my son.”

