

Big Brothers, Sisters Fill Role

Adolescents Need Friendly Rapport

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Lancaster New Era

LANCASTER, Pa. (AP) — They're ordinary teen-agers in so many respects.

They love ballgames. They're wild about pizza. Music is their lifeblood. They look forward to school dances and romances and all the chances that life offers.

When they talk about the future, their eyes brighten and their faces radiate that special glow reserved for young people with dreams.

But in one respect Pat and Jane Keen are different from most of their peers. Their father walked out years ago, leaving them and their mother, Eleanor, to fend for themselves.

Adolescence. It's such a mercurial time. Depression and ecstasy are often moments apart. The highs and lows of daily existence seem strangely amplified. It's a period in a child's life when adults have the potential for being a calming, straightening, supporting influence.

That's where Big Brothers-Big Sisters of Lancaster County comes into play. The program gives fatherless boys and girls from one-parent homes the opportunity to develop a special companionship with an adult.

Big Brothers and Big Sisters are exactly what their names imply. They aren't playing the role of a missing father or a mother who doesn't have time to spend with her daughter. Rather, they are sharing their "brotherly" concern and "sisterly" advice with a child who needs someone to care about him. Big Brothers and Big Sisters and their younger counterparts talk and laugh, work and play together. They're friends.

Pat, 17, has had the same Big Brother for several years. He says his Big Brother has helped keep him from failing a year at school. Together, they go fishing, play basketball, go to ballgames, and talk about everything under the sun.

Jane, 14, and her Big Sister, whom she began seeing about a year ago, seem to have just about everything in common, including a love for cheerleading, sports, pizza, life. Jane says that within an hour after she and her Big Sister met they got along as if they had known each other for years.

We wanted to get a taste of what it's like to have that sort of rapport, so we spent a Saturday with Pat and Jane Keen as their Big-Brother-and-Big-Sister-for-a-Day.

On first meeting, it's hard to believe that Pat and Jane are siblings. Pat is withdrawn, more of a listener than a talker. His smile is shy; his laugh, reserved. Jane is outgoing, a popular "do-it-all." Her big blue eyes sparkle with expression; she says what's on her mind.

But while downing a super-size pizza and a pitcher of Coke, we came to realize they are alike in at least one respect. Both need someone they can talk to.

"My Big Sister doesn't take the place of my mom," Jane said. "She's more like a friend. Mom and I are close and get along just great, but I can tell my Big Sister things that I just wouldn't tell my mom."

"The first time we met we just talked and talked and talked," Jane says. "It was really something. We hit it off just great."

Cheerleading is a common bond between the two. Jane, a sophomore at Lancaster Catholic High School, is a cheerleader for the girls' basketball team there. Her Big Sister was also a cheerleader in high school and gave Jane some help when she tried out.

Jane and her Big Sister organized a cheerleading squad to urge the Little Brothers basketball team on to victory.

"We both like to scream and jump around," Jane said.

She aspires to go to college and work with computers.

Pat was captain of the Little Brothers team this year. But unlike his sister, he's not a joiner. His eyes do light up, though, when he talks about APBA baseball and his favorite sports teams such as the Baltimore Orioles and the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Pat got his first Big Brother when he was in the third grade. He's had two since. Jane joined the Big Sister program when it started last year. Both are grateful for the benefits.

Jane loves to tell about the Phillies baseball game and the Ice Follies her Big Sister took her to. And Pat likes to talk about the time his Big Brother took him fishing in Maryland.

But the things they've done and the places they've visited, aren't really what's important when all's said and done.

"It's just knowing I have a

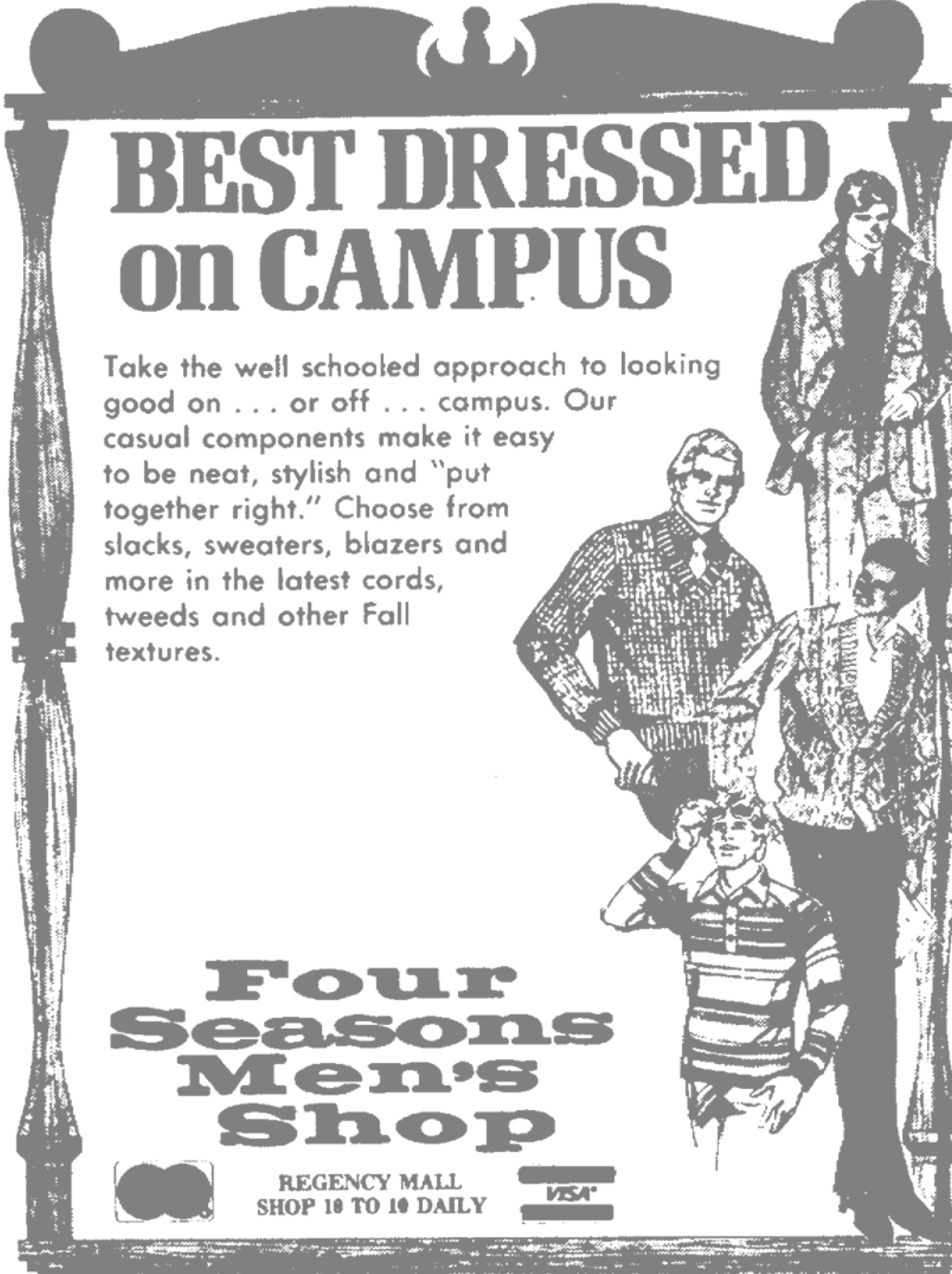
friend," Jane says. "My Big Sister can call me and I can call her when we want to talk."

Hans Wirsching, director of Big Brothers-Big Sisters of Lancaster County, a United Way agency, says the idea of the program is not for a Big Brother or Big Sister to take a child and spoil him.

"Money is not requested," he says. "The Big Brother doesn't have to take his Little Brother to places that cost money."

The program is open to fatherless boys between 7 and 14, and to men 18 or older. The Big Sister program is open to girls 7 to 16, from one-parent homes, and to women 18 or over.


Wirsching says the program is in need of Big Brothers, as well as Big Sisters for girls from Hispanic backgrounds. There are 40 boys waiting to be matched with Big Brothers. Big Brothers and Big Sisters are asked to share a couple hours a week with their younger friends.



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