



THE LITTLE BIG LIFE

***The Big Brothers Big Sisters organization
on the Cape makes a big difference
in young people's lives***

By Lisa Cavanaugh
Photography by Michael and Suz Karchmer

“Kids can be not very nice.” Angela Philbrook’s voice waivers remembering the taunts she received decades ago as her school bus dropped her off at the entrance to Nicker-son State Park. Philbrook’s family was homeless and living in a tent for several months while she was going to elementary school in Brewster—one of nine she attended as a child. “They would call me ‘jungle girl.’ It was mortifying,” she says.

But the generous affection of a local woman rescued the troubled little girl. “Meeting Marilyn was the defining moment of my life,” says Philbrook, referring to her “Big Sister,” her mentoring match from Big Brothers Big Sisters of Cape Cod & the Islands. After her mother enrolled both Philbrook and her sister in the program, Philbrook and Marilyn Roche bonded immediately. They would meet up once a week to talk or go to the beach. “Simple stuff like that had a big impact,” she recalls. Still, she was surprised when, after she admitted to Roche that she and her mom and sisters were living in the park, Roche was eager to visit.

“She said, ‘Why don’t I come join you for a campout? And I thought, Really? You want to sleep outside?’ Philbrook still seems incredulous after all these years. “But she arrived with marshmallows, and chocolate and graham crackers and we built a campfire. So for that one night, it was OK. It was fun. She gave me that moment of dignity and it made all the difference.”

That simple act of kindness is a wonderful example of what a “Big” can do for a child in crisis. Melanie Fenstermaker, development coordinator of BBBS of Cape Cod & the Islands,



“Meeting Marilyn was the defining moment of my life,” says lawyer Angela Philbrook, pictured at her Orleans office. Philbrook wears a silver bracelet that was and remains her mantra today: “She believed she could, so she did.”

her success. “No matter what adversity I faced, she never gave up on me,” says Philbrook. “She was an amazing friend, and whenever I would doubt myself, I would close my eyes and say, ‘I’m not alone; I have Marilyn.’”

has seen this kind of transformation many times. “The best stories we hear are those from former Littles who say that hands down, having a Big made an enormous impact on their success in life,” says Fenstermaker.

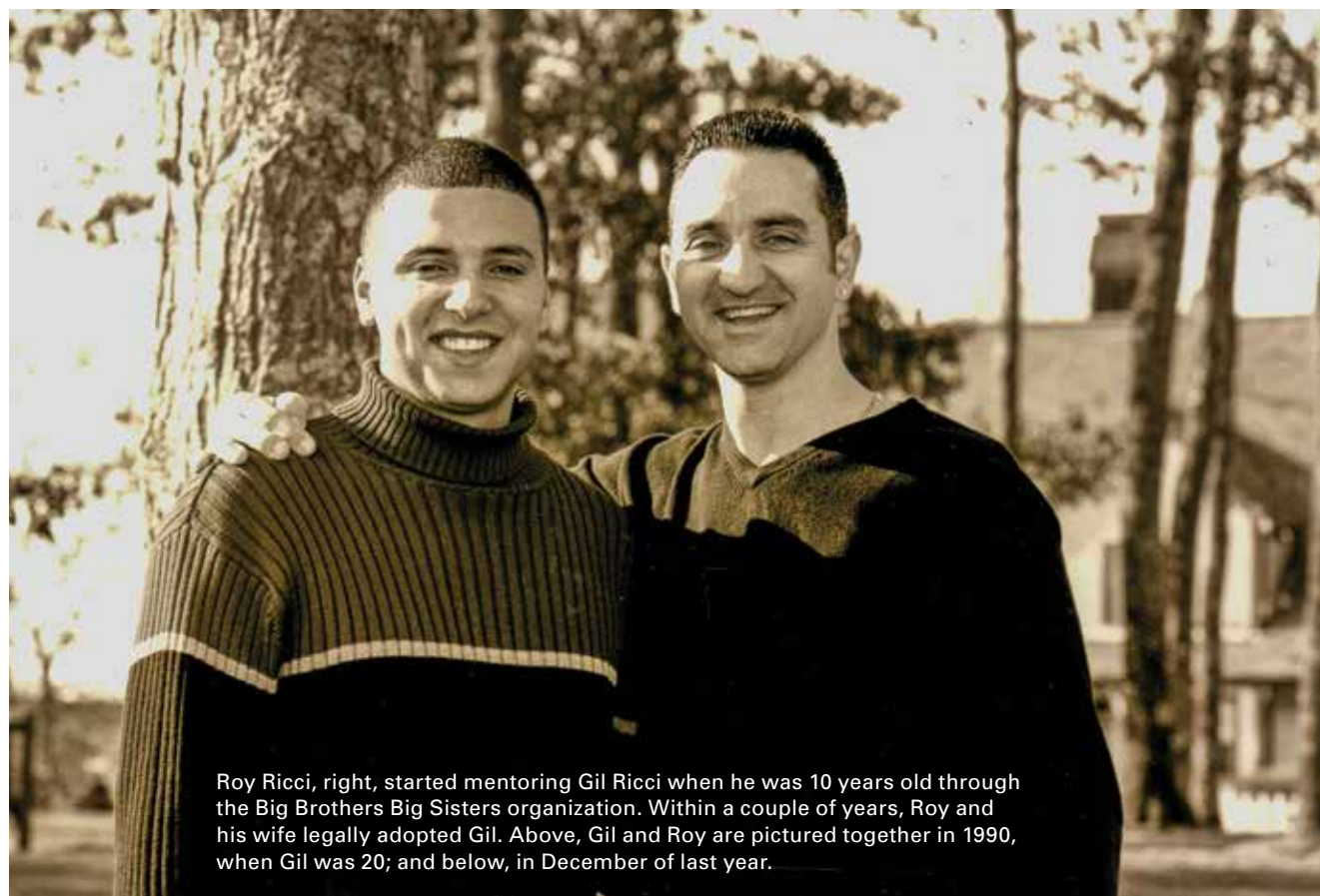
Philbrook went on to graduate from high school (“often doing my homework at Roche’s kitchen table”), earn her bachelor’s degree at Westfield State University and to attend Villanova University School of Law before returning to the Cape. She is now a lawyer and the owner of Cape Cod Title and Escrow, P.C., in Barnstable, with offices also in Orleans and Falmouth. Philbrook, who has a family of her own, credits her relationship with Roche as the key to

“No matter what adversity I faced, she never gave up on me.”



Photos from the 1980s and '90s illustrate the close bond between Marilyn and Angela: At top, Marilyn and Angie’s names written in the sand; at a 5th grade dance in 1985; and Angela with big sister Marilyn before senior prom day in 1992. Angela was chosen to be prom queen.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANGELA PHILBROOK



Roy Ricci, right, started mentoring Gil Ricci when he was 10 years old through the Big Brothers Big Sisters organization. Within a couple of years, Roy and his wife legally adopted Gil. Above, Gil and Roy are pictured together in 1990, when Gil was 20; and below, in December of last year.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ROY RICCI

“Without Roy, I wouldn’t have gotten to where I am in life. It changed me, knowing I had someone to turn to.”

— Gil Ricci

Gil Ricci, materials manager at Cape Air, can relate. His BBBS story began when he ran away from his foster home and took refuge on a Cape Cod Hospital shuttle bus. The driver alerted the Barnstable police and officer Roy Ricci joined the 10-year-old boy on the bus, just to chat. Eventually he took him to the station to eat some pizza, and in the end, made a deal with his frustrated foster mother: If she kept him in her home and signed him up for BBBS, then Roy would also enroll as a volunteer and mentor Gil. The relationship was an incredibly good match: Within a couple of years, Roy and his wife legally adopted Gil. Ricci recalls how it felt to be part of his new family. “It was hard to leave my sister (who was with the same foster mother), but I knew it would be better in the long run. The Riccis supported me in every way possible and provided me with the guidance I needed.”

Looking back on his life, he knows what an accomplishment it was to even graduate high school, let alone join the Air Force, get a degree and return to the Cape to marry his childhood sweetheart and have children of his own. “Tragedy tore my biological family apart. My twin brother was killed by a car in front of me and my sister. The grief and the guilt destroyed my mom.



She became an absentee parent and the state took us away.” He adds, “Without Roy, I wouldn’t have gotten to where I am in life. It changed me, knowing I had someone to turn to. There are so many kids out there who are struggling, walking along the same path I walked. People may not realize how important it really is for kids like that to have somebody there to listen to them.”

‘I MADE A FRIEND FOR LIFE’

The local chapter of Big Brothers Big Sisters has been in existence since 1974 and currently serves 300 children. They make new matches every year and are always looking for both volunteers to be Bigs and families to enroll their kids as Littles. With the variety of services among the widespread towns of the Cape, development coordinator Melanie Fenstermaker says the organization strives to recruit volunteers and develop programs that best suit individual communities. That may take the form of vibrant business partnerships, site-based programs and capitalizing on all the resources local volunteers have to offer.

One such volunteer is Carl Riedell (pictured, at right, pointing to his little brother, Nick), the owner of Riedell Plumbing, Heating and Air Conditioning in Osterville. Riedell was a Big Brother for more than 10 years to his Little Brother, Nick. Riedell was originally encouraged to sign up by BBBS’s former executive director Stu Peoples. “I got to be part of a great organization and I also made a friend for life in Nick,” says Riedell. Being matched with Nick brought more to his life than he had ever imagined, and he was able to provide some exceptional opportunities to him, including facilitating a scholarship to the prestigious Cape Cod Academy. “You like to give back to the community and I’m happy to say I was a part of it,” says Riedell. “I was able to influence a kid’s life; he’s a polite young man now and building a good life.” He pauses. “I’ll never forget him and I don’t think he will ever forget me.”



Big Brothers Big Sisters of Cape Cod and the Islands 684 Main St., Hyannis; 508-771-5150; www.bbbscci.org

Current Big Brother Matt Kohler can already tell that his connection with his Little Brother Xavier will last. As part of one of BBBS’s local school-based programs, Kohler meets with Xavier once a week during lunch and recess. “We have a secret handshake that we created just for us,” says Kohler.

“Xavier always has a huge smile on his face when I walk in. It makes my day.” The pair chat about ice forts and their shared love of Lego blocks. The most important aspect is that Kohler is present and listening. “He seems to just want to talk about whatever is on his mind and I’m happy to pay attention,” says Kohler.

Ricci agrees that being available is what counts. “It’s huge just to have someone to talk to.” Ricci adds that Nauset Disposal’s owner, Shawn DeLude, is another community-minded mentor who influences him. “Anything I need for Big Brothers/Big Sisters, and Shawn is all in,” he says.

Philbrook reiterates that a Big Sister or Big Brother doesn’t have to do much to make a difference in a Little’s world. “They aren’t looking for you to fix their whole life, they are looking for you to just be there,” says Philbrook. It’s that simple. I know it sounds like a lot, getting involved in a child’s life. It seems scary. But, literally, you could just make s’mores for them and it could change everything.”



The current staff of Big Brothers Big Sisters at their Hyannis office, from left to right: Melissa Ventola, Americorps ambassador of mentoring; JR Mell, regional director of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Cape and the Islands; and Julianne Kleinbauer, match support specialist.