

Ray Kipfer



Ray Kipfer sold pharmaceuticals for a living, never had any children of his own, and didn't have a close bond with his own father.

With this unlikely background, Kipfer became one of the community's strongest advocates for children in need. He did this without any special training, just a gift for listening and learning from the fatherless boys he helped.

Kipfer was initially nervous when he was matched with a boy in 1971 through the Big Brothers Association of Kitchener-Waterloo. "I thought I would have to talk about deep thoughts," Kipfer recalled once. "I worried about what guidance and direction I should be giving."

It didn't take long for Kipfer to realize that philosophical rumination was not required. The boy, who was having difficulty in school, just wanted someone to be with. So Kipfer did what he had been doing all his life as a salesman – he talked sports. Gradually, through the haze of sports scores and stories, the boy and he connected.

Later, when Kipfer visited the boy's school, the principal told him the child stopped having problems the very week that Kipfer befriended him. "You see a life, a young boy growing into adulthood and achieving his goals and you know that you were a part of that growth," said Kipfer. "You gain an appreciation of who you are."

Inspired by his relationship with the boy, Kipfer was paired with two more boys and in 1983 he joined the board of directors of the Big Brothers Big Sisters of Kitchener-Waterloo and Area. Several years after he was matched with an eight-year-old boy in 1975, the boy's mother died of cancer. The child's father had died several years before, so Kipfer and his wife Mary became legal guardians.

One board member said, "He's just the epitome of what we're trying to do . . . the guy just loves kids."

Kipfer's gift for guiding young men and his ability to raise money for the organization has earned him much admiration. In 2006 he was honoured with a prestigious Governor General's Caring Canadians Award for his thirty-five years as a Big Brother and fundraiser.

In the mid-1980s, Kipfer came to the rescue of the organization when funds were tight and board members didn't have enough money to build a larger building and keep its summer camp open. His fundraising efforts meant Big Brothers could move into its own building in 1989 and later secure a permanent home for the camp on the shores of the Saugeen River.

Kipfer, who has helped raise more than \$3 million for the organization, was known for a while as “Mister Big Brother.” One staff member said, “He’s seen this agency go through everything it has over the years. He’s been very important to making it what it is today.”

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