

Charlie Foster

Dr. William Taylor Center Memorial Award

A Big and a Little

“Are you still doing the Big Brother Little Brother program?” people ask me. “I know your little guy loves spending time with a college kid. It’s a really good program; it’s good for him to be around a positive influence. I’m sure you’re setting a great example.”

“Actually,” I say, “I think I get as much out of it as he does. It’s like an hour-long vacation in the week. It’s fun.”

I know they think I’m being modest. I tell everyone the same thing when I talk about my little brother. It’s true.

A year ago the program coordinator met me for two screening interviews in which we talked over lunch about kids in general and my two summers of camp counseling in particular. She took me the next week to the second-grade wing of Harry’s elementary school, where we introduced ourselves. Harry looks like a stop sign, because he is bigheaded and skinny—a pumpkin on a post—and when he deftly leaps on chairs and dives behind bookshelves or under portable blackboards to hide from me, he seems to defy physics, because he never tips and lands on his spherical skull, like a camera whose tripod has been upset. He alternates between basketball shoes and skateboarding shoes, and he wears uniform t-shirts for little league teams sponsored by local businesses. He has big brown eyes and tiny teeth. His hair always seems to be a month removed from a close shave.

He was ready to be friends that first day, with only cursory introductions. He was happy without me, but even happier to share his temperament with a new person. His exuberance was contagious. The coordinator said that my “little brother” was “needy” and that the program catered to “at risk” kids. Apparently, we’re a good match, because he was smiling that first day and he’s been smiling ever since. I think he knows he’s good for me.

We rummaged through the activity box, found a Nerf football and took it outside for the first of many games of Catch. I think his hand-eye coordination has improved because of our practice since that day, but I know I knocked some rust off my arm in going through long lost motions. I even echoed some of the coaching I’d absorbed ten years previously, almost without

thinking: “Catch with your hands extended out in front of your body. Snatch the ball out of the air with your hands.” I demonstrated with the foam ball, and its shape squished, yielding to my grip. On his next attempt, Harry launched a perfect spiral way over my head, so I couldn’t take my own advice. He said he would try to remember it, though.

Another time, Catch evolved into that backyard brand of Two-Hand-Touch where a player has to complete a pass to himself and then run to an imaginary goal line. I faked to one side trying to evade his “tackle” and fell in the mud, to Harry’s delight. He stopped running and walked to where I stood brushing off my pants but still holding the ball, and he tagged me with both hands.

When weather will not permit outdoor activities, Harry and I are happy to stay in and draw pictures. We’ve created entirely imaginary creatures, tried our hands at shuttles and spacescapes, and improvised washable marker lines on construction paper. When Harry requests particular themes, I try to realize them, and he oversees the process, abandoning his own drawing to shout encouragement and make suggestions. He almost always approves of my interpretations of our ideas, and the art we produce is better than I’m capable of making alone because of his happy energy.

Recently we came up with comic book characters inspired by items around the library: Clock Man, Ninja Chair, and Ice Man. Clock Man’s body was a pocket-watch face, and his heroic weapon was a hand held pendulum. Harry liked him, but added a jetpack to Clock Man so he could fly around, since criminals wouldn’t be afraid of a clock that couldn’t stop or speed up time and would bop you on the head at perfect intervals.

Ninja Chair was my idea, and I really didn’t think it through, because when I drew a chair with a bandana tied around the seat and another one around the backrest, there was no natural way for it to wield throwing stars or a katana. Like Clock Man, Ninja Chair would have to use altitude to its advantage, dropping on enemies from a roof, as ninjas sometimes do. After all, we reasoned, it has legs.

Ice Man developed on the page as a restaurant ice machine with eyes. The front-opening lid to the bin flapped as if the machine were speaking, spraying cubes in a frosty blast. Ice Man was our villain, so keeping any valuables in reach of his extension cord was risky. I think his preferred mode of terrorizing the populace was sneaking saliva cubes into diners’ sweet tea.

Harry kept our drawing of Clock Man, but he gave me the two other works, which I added to the construction paper collection in my car. Passengers are never as enthralled by my growing exhibit as I think they should be; we must be too edgy for the casual art patron.

Once Harry excitedly dictated a story, which I copied down, punctuated, and titled:

A Story by Harry, 9— My Little Brother— Which He Asserts Would Be Better Than “Monster Night at Grandma’s House” by Richard Peck and Don Freeman (Though He Hasn’t Read the Book)

*Once upon a time there was Harry, the main character (Harry is awesome). He went to his grandmother’s house to go to bed.
One night...one... ONE... ONE!... night...NIGHT... NIGHT!*

*Harry got scared.
He looked under his bed to see if there was anything there (there was nothing under there).
Then he looked in his closet and saw a big, fat, hairy monster (that smelled like rotten old eggs)!
“P.U.! You stink!” Harry said.
Then he kicked the monster.
“Ow!” the monster said. “You crazy little kid!”
Then the monster tripped on a rock and fell and hit his head on the same rock. Harry threw the monster outside and went back to bed.
The monster cried for his mommy. He said “I’ll never scare anybody ever again.”
Then they all lived happily ever after. The end.*

At the Big Brother Little Brother Christmas party last year, all the little brothers got 20 or so toys: action figures, sports cards, books—a whole Saturday morning’s worth of cartoon-sponsoring products. We big brothers were assured that we didn’t have to bring gifts, but I thought I would anyway, so I gave Harry a Marine Corps “boonie cover,” the kind of camouflage headgear we wear these days in the desert. I came up with the idea because I have a picture of myself when I was eight or so wearing my dad’s Vietnam-era cover for Halloween. I don’t remember what I thought about that costume, but anyone could look at the photo and know that I loved it. If nothing else, I figured no other kids were likely to have one. So I gave it to Harry, and his mom later told the coordinator during one of their routine check-ins that he won’t take the hat to school because he doesn’t want to lose it. When she passed that along to me, I immediately thought back to the time I brought one of my dad’s other covers for show-and-tell, and someone either maliciously or accidentally ripped the brim. Seventeen years later that memory moves me incredibly, especially when I consider that Harry must know better than to pass around cherished items the same way I know better—from experience.

Harry and I sit down for lunch in the library again. He is proud to be observed leaving the lunchroom for a meal with me. I am proud that this makes him proud. Once while his classmates watched us go, he told me that a little girl liked me, and I said to tell her thank you, but later it occurred to me that I should have said something more admirable, maybe “I like everybody,” even though that’s not true. He has a tray from the cafeteria, and in its divided sections are the foods he always gets: a hamburger today, but some days it’s a chicken sandwich, thin-cut fries, nectarine slices, gummy fruit snacks, and milk. During these lunches, he tells me about what movies he’s seen, what he’s been studying in school, and what kind of hijinks he and his friends have drummed up in their free time. He beams when he finds out that we both like *Star Wars*, when I remember the same flimsy little rulers used to teach measurements in math class, and when I reminisce about staying up late to play video games with neighbors and cousins.

I ask what the fruit snacks resemble— what’s the gimmick?: movie-tie-in, cartoon, TV show? Children’s book, it turns out: he’s eating Curious George snacks, trying all the flavors before returning to the first one. With these gummies, the Man in the Yellow Hat isn’t

represented, and I think that's strange, since so many other kinds of fruit snacks have a lemon flavor and for the Man that would be a perfect match. Instead, the orange gummies depict George wearing the "yellow" hat. This doesn't bother Harry, so I don't let it bother me. Lunch is only a part of our visit. He never eats his whole sandwich. He always eats all his nectarine slices. He never eats all his fries. He always drinks his milk. He's a good kid.

After lunch, the program coordinator shows Harry and me several games she has added to the activity box. I beat Harry at Connect Four in three quick games, and he takes losing well. We decide to throw the football; he gets a jacket from his classroom to wear outside for the ten minutes we have left. As soon as we are outdoors, we can see Harry's class on the playground in the distance. We take a few turns throwing and catching, and Harry looks furtively at the other kids having recess. They are all either playing tag or some other game whose lone organizing principle is "scatter as if your lives depend on it," and the children all simultaneously shriek to ward off the kid who is "it"; at the same time, they clamor for his attention, the thrill of his chase; it's as if they are trying to scare away a bear they have a crush on.

Harry catches a pass and then runs up to me with the ball, asking, "How much time is left now?" I appreciate how gracious he's being, how well-behaved this "needy" kid is as he tries to finish out his scheduled hour with me. He clearly wants to rush into the fray, and I can empathize, because I know I could tag the first kid I saw and totally recalibrate their game: they would immediately all try and touch me; I would become the elusive stag of legend and they would join forces in pursuit, howling at the idea of catching me and pulling off my shoes and then running around with their trophies held high. But they wouldn't get me, because I would be much too fast. Far-outnumbered, I would leave them all panting and whining and beaten soundly.

I am the "big," though, so I tell Harry in a very understanding voice that he can go ahead and rejoin his class if he wants—my feelings won't be hurt. My "little" runs to the playground, his happiness unplugged from me and ready to surge into and through all his friends, and I shout that he should tell his teacher he's there now. I take the football I wish I were still throwing back inside like a responsible adult, and then I walk out to my car using the parking lot door that doesn't take me back by the playground.