

## Businesses can make a difference in the lives of kids

As a marketing specialist for Nike Inc., Crystal Royer's days are a blur of meetings, traveling and deadlines.

But during her off hours she leaves that high-pressure world behind to tend to equally important matters of another order: to chat about boys, homework and other high school gossip with her 16-year-old "Little Sister" Nhi.

Crystal is an important person for Nhi, who has been in and out of foster care since she was 7. She is a constant. A source of hope. A role model as the teenager ponders career and education options that lay ahead.

The two were brought together nearly three years ago by Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metropolitan Portland. The organization is making dozens of other such matches through its Project Hope, which pairs caring adults with foster care children ages 6 to 17.

Social services organizations have gained ground reaching this vulnerable population with the help of the Children's Investment Fund.

In 2000, Portland voters created the Children's Investment Fund, which has to date, distributed nearly \$16 million in community-based programs proven to help kids in areas of early childhood development, after-school mentoring and child abuse prevention.

For instance, with support from the Children's Investment Fund, Project Hope greatly expanded its number of mentor-child matches from seven to 32, and anticipates serving a total of 100 children in foster care.

Project Hope helped change the course of Nhi's life. Over time, she and Crystal have built a deep friendship influencing the teen to improve in school, form

healthy relationships with her peers and even apply for her first job.

But many of the other nearly 6,000 foster care children in Oregon aren't so lucky and their plight demands attention from the Portland community. Recent studies show these teens become economic castoffs when they leave the state's foster care system as adults.

More than half suffer from a mental illness. One-third live in poverty and one-third don't have health insurance. One in five have been homeless. Only one in 50 goes on to attain a college degree. Another stat noticeable to all those who work or shop downtown: One-third of the city's street kids have been in foster care, which is why Project Hope is filling a noted gap.

Through Project Hope, a bilingual specialist helps identify children in Latino communities, and the organization works with other child

advocacy groups for referrals. These mentors go through detailed background checks and are matched after extensive interviews so they provide the best guidance.

Those who choose to attend court appointments with their Little Brother or Sister quickly become aware of the frustrating bureaucracy inherent in the system, as well as the accompanying heartache and isolation it brings to the children caught in it.

Project Hope staff members have their challenges too. Children have to be followed closely through the system as they are placed from family to family. And mentoring has to be coordinated with multiple caregivers who include foster parents, biological parents, state case-workers and the courts.

Then there are the needs of the chil-



PHOTO COURTESY OF BBBS

Juan and his mentor, Bob, spend some quality time together at a Big Brothers Big Sisters party.

dren themselves, who must learn to trust the adult mentors after a life of disappointment, betrayal and hurt.

Nhi is one of the program's success stories, but more children go waiting.

That's where the business community can make a difference. Their participation is crucial as the city's economic health and livability are tied to meeting the needs of Portland's children.

Employers can encourage their workers to join groups such as Big Brothers Big Sisters. They can offer sign-up incentives and sponsor weekday and weekend events for youths to learn more about the business world. Once on board, businesses and their employees can become ambassadors, spreading the word about a group's mission and goals.

For example, Royer helps organize agencywide activities such as Nike Field Day for youths in the Big Brothers Big Sisters program and helps recruit co-workers to become mentors.

For Royer, being a Big Sister has given

her life perspective and forces her to take a fresh look at life when it gets too hectic.

"Even when it gets crazy at work, I know there are times when I have to put her first. I forget about the bad meeting I may have had or the five things I have to do. It's a really good balance for both of us."

For Nhi, Project Hope has brought her the stability she has longed for in her life. "She's like the last piece of the puzzle in my life," she says about her Big Sister Crystal.

May is National Foster Care Month. It's a perfect time for us to reflect on how the city's prosperity is tied to children such as Nhi.

Your support of organizations such as Big Brothers Big Sisters and in a larger sense, Portland's Children's Investment Fund, gives her and others that opportunity.

**DAN SALTZMAN** is a Portland city commissioner. □



Guest  
Opinion

DAN SALTZMAN