

## Big race, little car for two Brothers



PHOTO SUPPLIED

Tom Thornton, at left, with his "little brother" Ron Bartleet, are seen off on their long drive out to Newfoundland by Littles Surafel and Jordan.

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There will be some seasoned veterans next month at the annual Targa Newfoundland, a 2,200 km road rally around Canada's beautiful 10th province.

Tom Thornton, 73, and Ron Bartleet, 45, aren't two of them.

Rally driving partnerships are composed much like marriages: complementary temperaments, shared values and a never-ending belief that your partner will always have your back.

For Thornton and Bartleet, this trust dates back nearly 40 years. That's when a 6-year-old boy, newly arrived from Scotland alone with his mother, met his 34-year-old Big Brother, still emerging from a recent divorce.

In a story that exemplifies the very best that a charity can be, these two have taken the meeting orchestrated all those years ago by the Big Brothers, Big Sisters organization and developed a friendship that has deepened into a connection uniting two families.

Recognizing that her shy son needed a steady male influence in his life, Bartleet's mother contacted Big Brothers a few months after landing in Canada.

Thornton wasn't new to the organization; his first Little Brother, Patrick, had grown up and gone off to Cyprus as a peacekeeper. He was ready for a new Little – though to this day, he still would like news of Patrick.

In essence, this is why the two now find themselves preparing to compete in the gruelling Targa Newfoundland. In its seventh year, the race has become a symbol of tenacity and skill, enthusiastically supported by the people of Newfoundland.

In an effort to raise awareness for Big Brothers, Big Sisters, Thornton and Bartleet will be driving a Mini Cooper S Clubman, sponsored by Mini Canada and Sirius Radio, from Niagara Falls to south-central Newfoundland, where the race begins.

Big Brothers, Big Sisters is building an alumni club dedicated to locating the 750,000 former Bigs and Littles who make up its history. The goal is to sign up 100 alumni each day (go to [thebigrace.ca](http://thebigrace.ca)), with all entrants getting the chance to win an expense-paid trip to St. John's to celebrate at the finish line.

While Bartleet had a three-month wait all those years ago before being paired with Thornton, children now sit on a list that numbers 10,000 nationwide. Fundraising is needed to secure caseworkers and to start matching up all those kids.

Think you don't have time? Listening to Thornton, a retired sales consultant, and Bartleet, a financial advisor, talk – and finish each other's sentences – it becomes clear that the Big /Little relationship is less about creating a new life for a child, and simply about bringing them along into yours.

"We'd just hang out, throw a football, even just paint a fence," said Bartleet.

"He taught me how to fish; he taught me how to ski; my first visit to a cottage; my first airplane ride; my graduation; my wedding; the birth of my daughter. Tom was there for all the firsts. He's the reason I went to university ..."

He trails off, as if imagining what life would have been without Thornton's influence.

Thornton has a joke inside every sentence. They will be videoing their exploits at Targa as they drive, and uploading to their website daily.

I ask Thornton if he can film while hanging upside down from a seatbelt. He is momentarily lost for words, but the fact these two are game to place their trust in each other in the midst of the unknown speaks volumes.

It's said you can't pick your family. But for Tom Thornton and Ron Bartleet, they did exactly that, 40 years ago.

And counting.

*If you are a former Big Brother or Little Brother, you could win an expenses-paid trip to Newfoundland to watch the Targa rally. Got to [www.thebigrace.ca](http://www.thebigrace.ca) to register.*

*Lorraine Sommerfeld's column appears Saturdays in Wheels and Mondays in Living. [www.lorraineonline.ca](http://www.lorraineonline.ca)*