

THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Big race for Big Brothers

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Big Brothers Big Sisters of Hamilton and Burlington

Hamilton: 639 Main St. E., 905-525-3860

Burlington: 560 Guelph Line, 905-637-9911

Online: callbigbrothers.com

As a teenager, Ron Bartleet hated school.

But each time he came close to dropping out, he'd hear the voice of his Big Brother, Tom Thornton, in his head, and would stay in school.

"Seeing his lifestyle and his faith in me -- he'd talk all the time that I'd have that lifestyle if I worked hard, and it came true," Bartleet says.

Bartleet, of St. Catharines, is now 45 and a financial adviser after a career in sales.

He and Thornton, 72, of Niagara-on-the-Lake, have had a Big Brother relationship for 40 years -- long past the time such relationships come to an end.

They've been to each other's weddings and Thornton has shared many other milestones in Bartleet's life -- his graduation from university, the birth of his daughter and his first house.

Now, the two are embarking on an adventure of a lifetime under the auspices of Big Brothers.

They are competing in **Targa** Newfoundland, a 2,200-kilometre road rally through Newfoundland from Sept. 13 to 18.

The rally is on Bartleet's "bucket list." They'll be driving a Mini Cooper S Clubman, sponsored by the car company, out to the rally, taking pictures and blogging daily at thebigrace.ca.

Their main purpose is to raise awareness about Big Brothers Big Sisters by highlighting the need for mentors and encouraging former Little Brothers to reconnect.

It's only fitting that their race should have such a purpose.

"We bonded around cars," said Bartleet, who was just a shy six-year-old when he met Thornton in Toronto.

"We'd watch racing on TV. We went to Mosport together. Every year, we entered the soap box derby in High Park."

Bartleet, the son of a single mother, came to Canada from Scotland with his mother and grandmother when he was five.

"They really became extended family," Thornton said.

"Tom had a huge impact on my life," Bartleet said. "If it hadn't been for Tom, it's very likely I would not have gone on to university."

school."

Over the years, Thornton, who owned a sales and management training company, made comments such as, " 'When you're in university, you'll be able to do this,' and, 'When you finish university, you'll be able to earn the money to buy the cars you like,' " he said.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Hamilton and Burlington has a waiting list of 238 children, the majority in Hamilton and 167 of them in Burlington.

"Unfortunately, some of the boys will wait over two years," said Marianne Noakes, executive director of the local organization.

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• Photo: Scott Gardner, the Hamilton Spectator / Ron Bartlett, left, and his former Big Brother Tom Thornton are driving in the Targa Newfoundland rally together for Big Brothers Big Sisters.

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