

OUTDOORS

The Wichita Eagle

Passing it on



Michael Pearce/The Wichita Eagle

Sammy Gray, left, takes a break during a Saturday morning dove hunt to talk with his "big brother," Nick Mork. Big Brothers-Big Sisters of Sedgwick County is the first group of its kind to welcome hunting as an activity.

Outdoorsmen share their knowledge with kids in Big Brothers-Big Sisters program

BY MICHAEL PEARCE
The Wichita Eagle

RENO COUNTY

Sammy Gray's eyes were open and lively at time when most of his friends were sleeping Saturday morning. He watched a crimson sun rise over rolling croplands, a shotgun carefully resting on his lap.

Everything he saw he committed to a memory bank that's seen and heard more nature this year than many of his buddies will in a lifetime.

Sammy has sat in pre-dawn darkness and listened to a distant coyote serenade and heard the riotous noise of a dozen gobblers gobbling from a springtime roost. The 12-year-old has watched the big birds strut across a pristine meadow and had deer pass so close he could have counted the whiskers on an old doe's muzzle.

When asked what it was like to climb a Flint Hills peak and look over miles and miles with no signs of civilization, he said, "Man, that was cool," and cracked a big smile.

Gray has enjoyed such Discovery Channel scenes because of one of the best-known youth organizations in the area, Big Brothers-Big Sisters of Sedgwick County. Last year, the group became the first of its kind in the nation to openly embrace the shooting sports.

"Fishing's always been popular, but hunting's touchier because of the issue of kids and



Michael Pearce/The Wichita Eagle

Before being allowed afield, "little brothers" pass a hunter education course and receive shooting instruction. Quail Unlimited's Mike Christeansen recently worked with Josh Flyinghorse at a target range.

guns," said Nick Mork, president of the local chapter, which holds the distinction of being the largest in the nation.

"We decided to look at promoting hunting after Wildlife and Parks came to us with their Pass It On Program, which is designed to get more people hunting."

Mork said the organization adopted hunting as a way to involve both sides of the Big Brother-Little Brother equation. Every year there are kids who express an interest in hunting or shooting. He knows there are thousands of Kansas males for whom the sports are favorite pastimes.

Indeed, some mentors have signed on because they can now share their love of a wetland or woodlot with a Little Brother. Mork said the program has been supported by far more than just individual volunteers.

Through Pass It On, ammunition and clay targets have been provided and shotguns have been loaned. About every major conservation group has donated money, equipment and, most importantly, time and opportunity. Most notably, the Wichita-based Ark Valley chapter of Quail Unlimited has sponsored several target shoots and hunts for upland birds and doves.

Finding places to hunt is rarely a problem. Flint Oak Ranch has invited about 20 of the young hunters out for a Labor Day dove hunt. The Kansas Guide and Outfitters Association has said the group will never lack for places to hunt deer and turkeys.

When Plan A of Gray and Mork's Saturday morning hunt fell through at the last minute, Cody Heitschmidt of Nickerson-based H&R Outfitters immediately donated his services to the Little Brother-Big Brother team.

As a lifelong sportsman, Mork said he wants the kids afield as much as for what it

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will do for them for years to come as on any given day.

He believes a lot of character-building is involved with the sports, things like respect for nature, patience, self-control and self-confidence.

"You should have seen Sammy's face when he passed the hunter safety course. He worked hard and he knew he'd done it," Mork said. "It was a really big deal. These kids need that kind of positive reinforcement in their lives. Any time a kid accomplishes something, it builds self-esteem. That's so, so important."

As well as passing the state-mandated hunter education class, all of the Little Brothers interested have undergone several rounds of shotgunning instruction on clay targets. There, too, Mork said, they've been able to improve themselves.

"They know holding a loaded gun, and shooting it, is the ultimate in responsibility," he said. "It's a step towards manhood for the boys. They know they're being trusted."

On their opening dove season hunt, Gray handled the pump 20-gauge as he'd been taught. In two hours of waiting, the muzzle never

pointed in an unsafe direction, and the safety was never off or the trigger touched unless it was time to take a safe shot.

Occasionally, when his arms tired, Gray carefully handed the shotgun to Mork for safety's sake.

As well as in-state, Mork is nationally known for his success in the Wichita area. He has, after all, basically been the program's director since it started with 14 matches in 1970. That number is currently at the nation-leading 1,700 and climbing.

As word of the adoption of the hunting and shooting program has spread to other Big Brothers groups across the country, he's answered lots of questions and endured some criticism.

"The responses always seem to be black or white, with no middle

ground," he said. "I've heard quite a bit of 'that's really neat, we've got to get into that,' but I've also heard things like, 'I can't believe you're putting guns in the hands of children.'"

Mork said most of the doubters have been from large urban areas, where guns and hunting have only been seen in a negative light.

"I think the main problem is that they just don't understand the positives," Mork said.

Had those doubters been along Saturday morning when a single shot dropped a dove from a high-flying flock, they'd have seen a huge smile of satisfaction and accomplishment on Gray's face as he watched a lab retrieve his first dove.

Then they most certainly would have understood.



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