

PASS IT ON

Ark Valley Chapter and Kansas Big Brothers Big Sisters give Kids a unique opportunity to learn about wildlife

by Rachel Gross



For the last three years, the Ark Valley Chapter in Wichita, Kansas has been working closely with Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) of Sedgwick Co. and their Pass It On – Outdoor Mentors program to introduce at-risk kids in the BBBS program to the outdoors. From hosting sporting clays shoots, dove hunting seminars, dove and upland game hunts, to volunteering to drive van-loads of kids to a celebrity shoot, Ark Valley Chapter members have been making a difference for kids in central Kansas.

Kansas BBBS began expanding the Pass It On program in July of 2002, hiring Quail Unlimited State Chairman, Mike Christensen, as their Director of Outdoor Mentoring Projects. Although the program was originally geared towards Kansas's youth, Pass It On has received the endorsement of Big Brothers Big Sisters of America to serve as a pilot program in other areas of the country. Mike is now working with other BBBS agencies to establish the Pass It On program in four states.

This success would not be possible without the help of our local QU chapters. Last January, the Ark Valley chapter hosted their third annual End of the Season Upland Game Hunt for eleven BBBS Littles, including Little Brother Eric Mitchell.

Born and raised in the city (well, Wichita is a city for us Kansas folks), fifteen-year-old Eric Mitchell had never been on a hunt or even shot a gun, although he had taken a hunters' education class. Of the eleven hunters, seven had never been hunting before and four of these had never handled a shotgun before.

Working with volunteers from Young Hunters Safety, Inc., two or three youngsters at a time would be accompanied in the field. When a dog was on point, a youngster would be given a shell and directed to put their finger on the safety. Once the bird was flushed they were to take the gun off safety and take the shot.

"The dogs would work the fields, and then go on point," Eric recalled. "They stood really still and won't move an inch... that's when you know the dog has found a bird. It's really cool to see them doing that."

Throughout the day, Eric experienced the thrill of quail flushing, the exhilarating blasts of shotguns, and the excitement of watching dogs work the field. Although he was not able to bring down any quail in this, his first outing, he was hooked.

Changing Lives

Hundreds of youth such as Eric are now getting a unique opportunity to learn about outdoor activities such as hunting with dogs, bird watching, archery, target shooting, and fishing, through Pass It On – Outdoor Mentors, a program that was developed by the staff of Wichita's Big Brothers Big Sisters of Sedgwick County. Pass It On pairs Little Brothers and Sisters with volunteers that have a passion for outdoor activities.

The program began in 2000, when Steve Williams, then Secretary of the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks (KDWP) (now director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service), approached BBBS of Sedgwick County about working with KDWP to get more kids involved with hunting and

fishing. It was then that the Ark Valley Chapter first got involved, hosting a youth hunt with the local Pheasants Forever Chapter for twelve Littles from Wichita. Randy Wells, Director of the Cops for Kids program, was then directing the Pass It On program on a part-time basis.

"We had been working with KDWP's staff to help us take kids fishing," Randy said. "When we wanted to offer hunting to the Littles, KDWP steered us towards working with the Ark Valley Chapter. It's been a great relationship for us, and they have done a great job working with the Littles."

The Pass It On program attracted a number of Wichita Little Brothers and Sisters. "Although a large number of our Littles live in cities, many of these kids have indicated that they are interested in hunting, fishing, shooting, and other outdoor activities," Mike Christensen, Kansas Big Brothers Big Sisters' Director of Outdoor Mentoring Projects said. "This program seems like a natural fit for youth, and a great way to get a new group of mentors involved with the program."

Through Pass It On, Littles receive instruction on conservation and safety issues. They have a unique opportunity to build respect for wildlife and, they gain a friend who will provide them with positive outdoor experiences.



These are some of the hunters from the End of the Season hunt hosted by Ark Valley Quail Unlimited Chapter.

A Cherished Tradition

Like all Little Brothers and Sisters that participate in Pass It On activities, Eric was required to take a hunters' education class and pass a test that covered all of the essentials of hunter safety, including proper firearm and bow handling, conservation, ethics, and game identification.

"We learned how to use guns and how to clean guns, and we talked about what types of birds you can shoot in different months and how to clean them after you shoot them," Eric said. "We also talked about safety rules. The instructors told us that you should never keep a loaded gun in the house, always keep the safety on and never swing a gun around. Also, you should never go hunting by yourself."

In January, Eric passed the hunter safety test on his first try and the following weekend he went on his first hunt, the End of Season Upland Game Hunt. When he came away from the hunt empty-handed, Eric immediately wanted to try it again. "He called me the next week, asking 'when are we going hunting again?'" Mike said. "He was disappointed when I told him that he would have to wait until next year. But the following week, we were fortunate to have Dan Drake and Kreg Boynton of Signature Hunts of Kansas call, wanting to take some Littles hunting in their controlled shooting area."

On that hunt, southeast of Atlanta, Kansas, Eric got his second chance to take home a quail. That morning, Eric watched as Kreg Boynton's Brittany, Mike's English pointer and another volunteer's Visla worked the fields as a unit. He saw firsthand how one dog would honor another's point, and he bagged his first quail. "When we got out there, it was really early in the morning, and we started looking for the birds," Eric said. "They (the volunteers) told me that they were going to scare some birds out for me, and they did and I shot one. I have a picture that I framed of me holding the bird, and I keep it in my room."

Partners in Mentoring

In addition to the Ark Valley Chapter, the Cottonwood Valley Chapter hosted a youth hunt with BBBS of Marion County last November. The Tri-Rivers and Emporia Area Chapter have both contributed much needed financial support to the program as well. And many other wildlife conservation organizations have donated resources, volunteers and funding to Pass It On. The program received a big boost last fall when the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) gave Kansas BBBS a grant to help get the expansion program started as part of their STEP OUTSIDE program.



Little brother, Eric Mitchell and his first bird.

Wildlife and Parks has been instrumental in the success of the program in Kansas. With their help, Kansas Big Brothers Big Sisters (the largest Big Brothers Big Sisters program in the nation), has been able to expand the Pass It On program to BBBS agencies throughout the Sunflower State.



Little Dana Schweers is taking a bird from Kreg Boynton's Brittany.


The program has gained the attention of Jeremiah Moralez, Eric's Big Brother. Although Jeremiah regularly enjoys camping, fishing and other outdoor activities, he had no experience with hunting until recently. "I saw pictures of Eric on the hunts, and he's all smiles, from ear-to-ear, really digging it," Jeremiah said. "I can see so much enjoyment in him, that it inspired me to get involved, as well." "I kept begging him to go with me, because I knew he was interested in learning how to hunt," Eric said. "Now, it's pretty cool. Instead of teaching me something, I get to teach him some stuff." Jeremiah is now waiting for the next available hunters' safety class, so that he can receive his certification. He and Eric are also eager for the upcoming hunting season, when Eric hopes that he will get a chance to try deer hunting.

Bringing the Outdoors to Youth

Through Pass It On, kids like Eric have had an opportunity to participate in a number of outdoor events. Last November, five Littles from across Kansas had an opportunity to go pheasant hunting with David Segui, Baltimore Orioles' First Baseman, Jerry Holloway, former Cardinals tight end, Eric Williams, former Cardinals linebacker, and Mel Gray, former wide receiver for the Cardinals and Lions at the David Segui Youth, Women, and Celebrity Pheasant Hunt, held in Glen Elder, Kansas. Ark Valley Chapter members volunteered to drive 23 Littles from Wichita to Glen Elder to participate in the afternoon trap shoot and the banquet that evening. In December, Littles got to enjoy some of the best deer hunting in Kansas on the 42,000-acre Z Bar Ranch, owned by avid sportsman Ted Turner.

Other outings to the Z Bar Ranch are already planned for this summer and fall. Littles from across Kansas have had the opportunity to hunt upland game, waterfowl, doves, deer and turkey, experiences that would not have been possible without the Pass It On program.

"At-risk kids need to be engaged in activities that are healthy and positive, like fishing and hunting," Mike said. "Pass It On is a great way for us to get these kids involved with a mentor while they learn a fun, wholesome hobby they'll be able to continue to enjoy for a lifetime."

Jeremiah agrees, "The outdoors is something that Eric and I have always enjoyed together and this is another thing we can do that's positive, constructive, and a good opportunity for us to bond. I know we'll continue to do this in the future, because it's too good of an opportunity to pass up." 

To find out more about how your chapter can get involved with Pass It On - Outdoor Mentors, contact Kansas Big Brothers Big Sisters at (316) 263-3300 or e-mail passiton@ksbbbs.org.