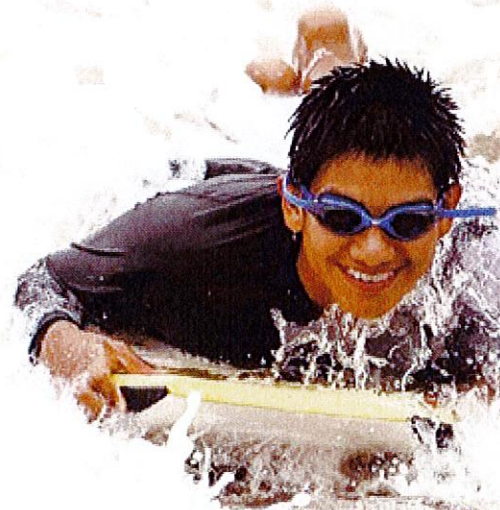
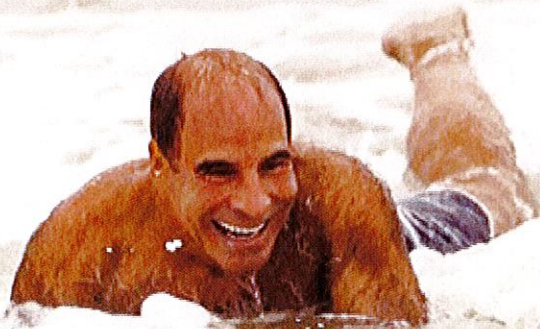


# exploreLI



# Brotherly bond

WHAT THE  
**BIG BROTHERS PROGRAM**  
HAS MEANT TO THESE  
LONG ISLANDERS  
**B2**

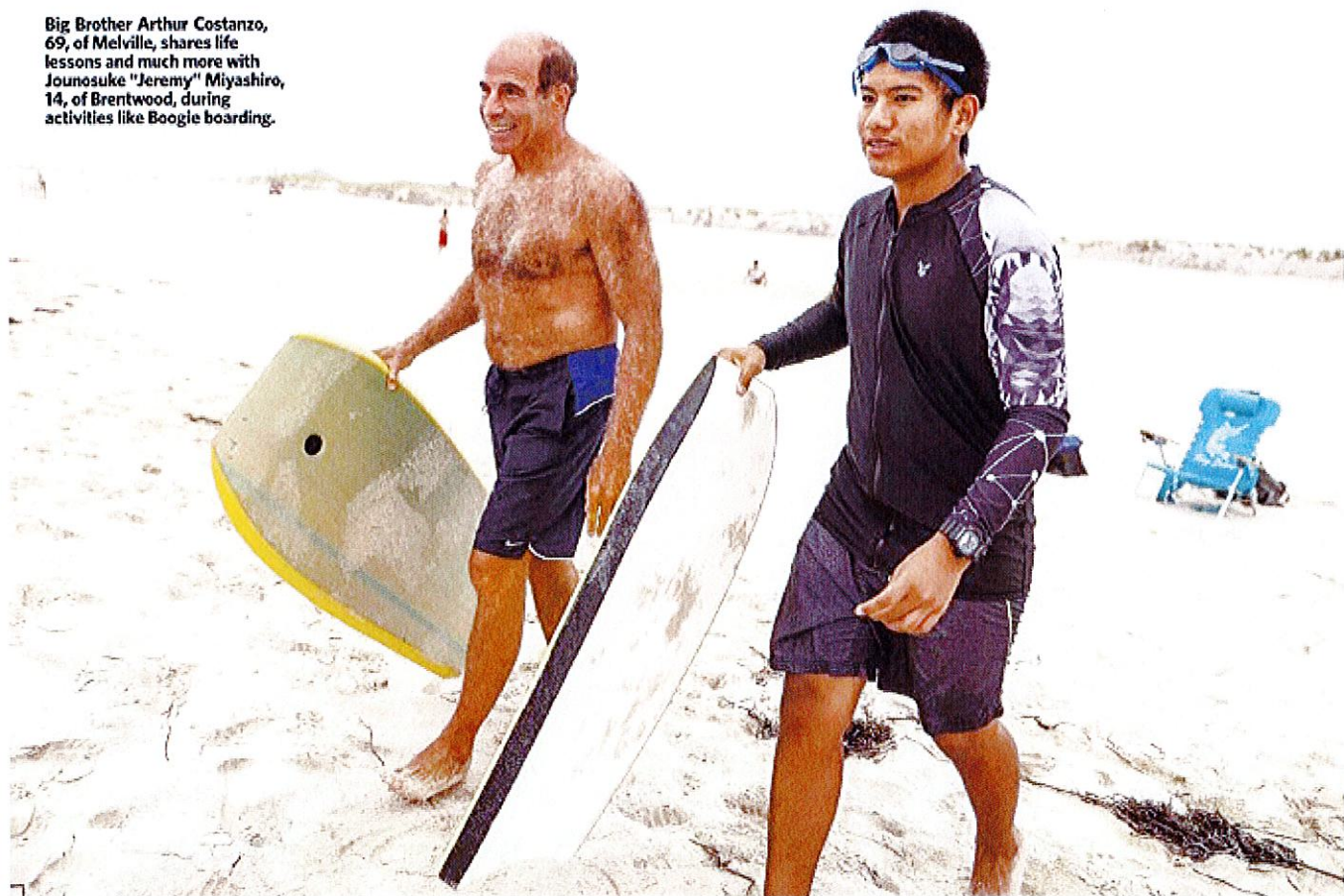
**BUSHELS OF FUN** Where to go apple picking on LI [newsday.com/lifestyle](https://newsday.com/lifestyle)





Explore LI

Big Brother Arthur Costanzo, 69, of Melville, shares life lessons and much more with Jounosuke "Jeremy" Miyashiro, 14, of Brentwood, during activities like Boogie boarding.



FRANZONI / STEVE PIZZOLI

# The impact of Big Brothers

3 stories of how the program helps kids — and their mentors — on LI

BY BETH WHITEHOUSE  
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**M**att Hettler, 59, was driving Quinton Grant to an outing when the 11-year-old said something that Hettler says touched his heart. "You're one of my best friends," Quinton told him.

Hettler is Quinton's "Big Brother" — the account manager from Smithtown and the sixth grader from Kings Park were matched in 2021 by Big Brothers Big Sisters of Long Island.

Close to 200 boys are currently in the Nassau and Suffolk program, but more boys are waiting for a match. The organization is desperate for more Big Brother volunteers, says Fabiola Turner, chief program officer. In fact, Quinton's younger

brother, Jani, 9, has been on the waiting list for more than a year.

Sixty-four boys are on the waiting list, and 114 additional boys are in the pipeline and will need matches once their intake is finished, Turner says. Of the Little Brothers, 63% live on or below the poverty line, Turner says.

Big Brothers commit to two outings a month for two to four hours each with their Little Brothers, and act in a mentoring role, she says. Outings can be low cost or free, such as taking walks or going to parks to play catch, and the organization also frequently offers free group programs and gives out free tickets to events such as professional sports games.

Three current Big Brothers share why they joined the program and what they get out of it.



**The Big:** Arthur Costanzo, 69, an independent financial adviser from Melville

**His Little:** Jounosuke 'Jeremy' Miyashiro, 14, a high school freshman from Brentwood

Costanzo raised twins who are now 30. He'd been heavily involved in coaching their sports teams and enjoyed working with kids. "I thought, 'I really want to connect with somebody and see how that goes.' I personally don't like just throwing money at things. I thought time was more precious than money."

Costanzo went through the Big Brothers Big Sisters interview process, which included a background check, references from his professional, coaching and personal life, and online training. Then he met with Jeremy and Jeremy's mother, Gracelda Castro, 44, a single parent who works caring for the elderly.

"I was legitimately a little concerned. How would they feel about me, this total stranger, coming into their lives?" Costanzo says. He needn't have worried — "After our interview, we looked at each other and said, 'We're ready to go forward.'"

Jeremy was born in Japan and only moved to Long Island a little more than a year ago. His father, who is Japanese, isn't involved in his life. His mother is Peruvian and speaks Spanish. English is Jeremy's third language. Castro moved with Jeremy, her only child, to the United States because she thought Jeremy would have more opportunities in this country. Castro's mother lives in Brentwood, which is what led them to Long Island.

Costanzo says she learned about the Big Brothers program when a representative visited the English language class she was taking through BOCES. "I was the first person to raise my hand and ask for more information," she says in Spanish. "The culture is completely different in the United States. My son needs someone to explain the culture to him, to advise him."

One of Costanzo's first outings with Jeremy was climbing the Fire Island Lighthouse. They also often go to the beach and Boogie board. Costanzo tells Jeremy that his ability to speak Japanese and Spanish is an "absolute gold mine." He tells him, "You can do anything you want with your life."

"It's very good for me," Jeremy says of the program. "It's fun. I'm not just in my room playing video games. Sometimes I talk about, 'I

want a car and I have to save.' He gives me advice. Sometimes we talk about my future. We talk in English, so I learn more."

Says Costanzo of Jeremy: "I feel very attached to him. When we're done and he says, 'Thank you, thank you, thank you,' and he says, 'I had fun, we had fun,' he lets you know he really had a good time and it's precious. That's rewarding to me."

**The Big:** Matt Hettler, 59, an account manager from Smithtown

**His Little:** Quinton Grant, 11, a sixth grader from Kings Park

Hettler learned about the Big Brothers Big Sisters program when a friend was becoming a Big Sister and put him down as a reference. His children are grown. "I was at a point where I said, 'What's next?' And he thought maybe the program would be for him as well."

Hettler was matched with Quinton, who has seven brothers and sisters between the ages of 9 and 28. Quinton's mother, Simone Smith, 43, is studying criminology and criminal justice online and says she hopes to get a job at a women's or juvenile correction facility. She says she's learned through her studies that having a positive role model can keep kids out of trouble. And with so many children and school to juggle, she says the program is as much a help to her as it is to Quinton.

"I didn't have enough time to spend with each of them separately. I felt like this would help me," she says. Hettler will take Quinton to his sports practices, for instance; Smith says it's not possible for her to be at all her children's games at the same time.

The two have gone apple picking out east, they've gone to a planetarium, and they visit the library where Hettler might help Quinton with his homework. "He's got a special interest in math. We're going through multiplication tables," Hettler says. They might just go out for pepperoni pizza. "It's really not supposed to be a financial burden at all," Hettler says of being a Big Brother.

They'll participate in many of the social and educational programs that Big Brothers Big Sisters runs gratis for participants. For instance, they've been able to spend a day at Splash Splash, attend a program about DNA at Stony Brook and go to Mets and Islanders games.

After a year together, Big Brothers are permitted to introduce Little

See BIG on B4



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Matthew Hettler, 59, of Smithtown, is a Big Brother to Quinton Grant, 11, of Bay Shore.

## The impact of Big Brothers on LI

BIG from B3

Brothers to the rest of their family and bring them to their homes. Hettler has had Quinton over to make smash burgers on Hettler's grill.

Smith says she likes that her son has a man to talk to. "Sometimes because you're a woman and have boys, it may be uncomfortable for your son to talk to you about puberty," she says. Quinton and Hettler may also talk about issues that come up in his life; for instance, when Quinton lost his glasses Hettler talked to him about responsibility.

Currently, they talk about middle school, which Quinton starts this month. "It's a big transition. Big, big changes," Hettler says. "More kids in the school, more social media influences, phones. A different structure, going from one teacher to multiple teachers. So, I'm just trying to prepare him for it."

As for Quinton, he is just soaking in the wisdom of his older "best friend."

"I like talking to somebody. I like talking about school," Quinton says.

**The Big:** Mark Szalyga, 49, a pharmacology industry sales professional from Wantagh

**The Little:** Lucas Azan, 16, a high school junior from Levittown

Szalyga has been Lucas' Big Brother for nine years, since Lucas was 7. "When I decided to volunteer, I already had a little baby," Szalyga says. But mentoring a child was something important to Szalyga, who says he remembers coaches and others who had a huge influence on his life when he was growing up. His wife, Laura, 45, an accountant, agreed he should try it.

Szalyga says he was nervous to meet Lucas, whose biological father and grandfather died when Lucas was little. "I was a grown man — 40 years old, and I was nervous walking into

### BIG BROTHERS BIG SISTERS OF LONG ISLAND

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Long Island is also always looking for Big Sisters, with 12 girls on the waiting list, including Isabella Virgilio, 14, of West Islip.

Isabella's mother died when Isabella was 7, says her father Michael Virgilio, 46, who works in aerospace and defense. "It was obviously a tough go, still is," he says. "I definitely felt like she could use somebody she could talk to besides me."

Virgilio has had a Big Sister in the past, but that Big Sister had to leave the program because she was getting married and starting a new business and didn't have the time to continue, Isabella says.

The two would go shopping together and go to the nail salon, Isabella says. "I live with my dad and my brother . . . it's just the three of us. I like the idea of getting to do new things and being able to talk to someone besides my dad sometimes. He doesn't go through the same things because he's a male."

**More info:** To begin the process of becoming a Big or Little, visit [bbbsli.org](http://bbbsli.org) and click "Become a mentor." To enroll a child, look at that section of the website. Or call 516-731-7880, Ext. 212, for both Nassau and Suffolk counties.

—BETH WHITEHOUSE

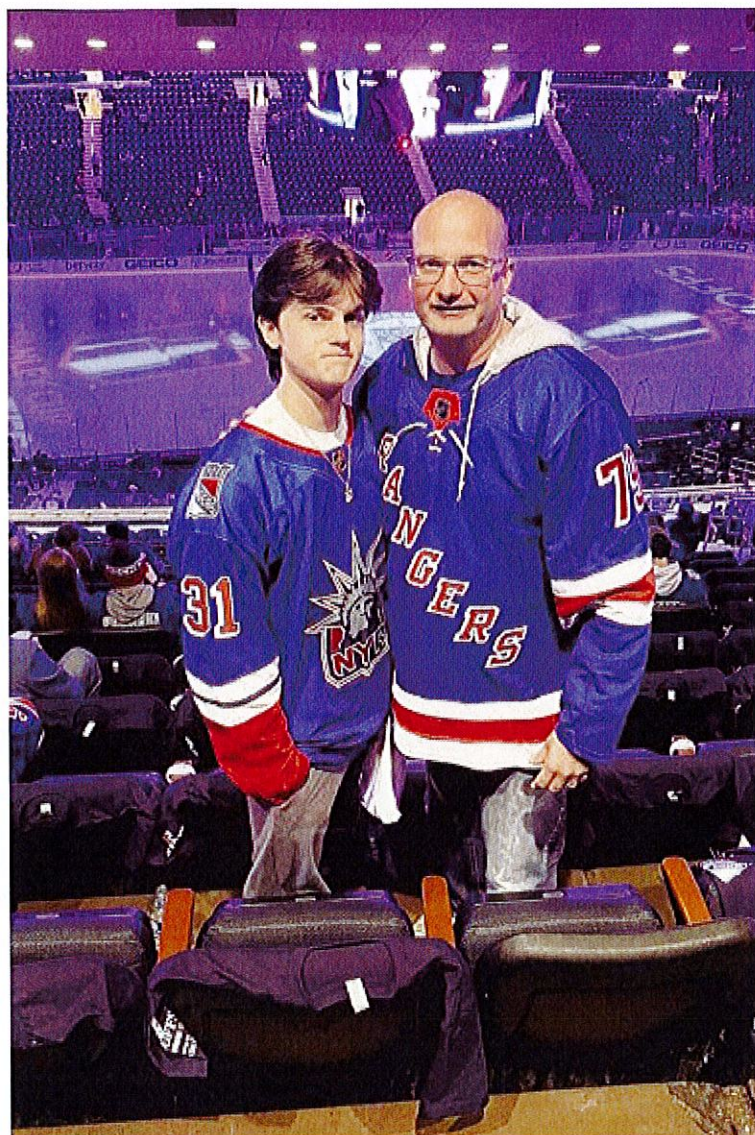
the room to meet a 7-year-old boy," Szalyga says.

But, as Lucas says now, "It started good, and it's still going good."

The duo built a relationship through activities including miniature golf, the batting cage, go-carting, Escape Rooms and even adventures such as hot-air ballooning. "Sometimes we would just play catch," Szalyga says. One time Lucas broke a bone, so Szalyga taught him to play chess.

Lucas nominated Szalyga for a Big Brother of the Year award this year, writing in his nomination essay: "But more profound than these adventures were the life experiences we shared. When I was a very





Mark Szalyga, of Wantagh, has been Big Brother to Lucas Azan, 16, of Levittown, for nine years.

scared 8-year-old boy with a Mom battling Stage III cancer. Mark supported me by listening to me and giving me a safe outlet." (Lucas' mom is better now.)

Says Szalyga: "When my dad was terminal and died a year and a half ago, Lucas did the same for me. Lucas came to my dad's wake with his mother. I was shocked."

As Lucas has gotten older,

their conversations have matured. "We call each other; we trust each other," Szalyga says.

Says Lucas: "I'm able to talk to him about everything. He's very supportive. He's definitely a very good role model for me. He's a father figure and a friend."

Now, Szalyga's first son is 12, and he's had another son, who is 8. His sons look up to

Lucas, Szalyga says. "Lucas is part of my family. To be very honest with you, I get just as much out of it as I hope Lucas does," Szalyga says.

Though the Big Brothers program officially ends when the Little Brother turns 21, Szalyga says their relationship won't. "I have every intention of knowing Lucas for the rest of my life," Szalyga says.

## Paddleboarding just got bigger in Oyster Bay

BY DAVID J. CRIBLEZ  
david.criblez@newsday.com

Paddleboarding is typically done individually, but the WaterFront Center of Oyster Bay has turned it into a group activity with the Mothership. The new 17-foot paddleboard holds six people and is available to rent in Oyster Bay Harbor.

"We thought this would be a great opportunity for people to work together as a team on the water and have a fun experience," says Shannon Kelly, the WaterFront Center's marketing director. "It's perfect for families. Parents can go out with their kids, this way everyone can be together."

This hard inflatable vessel has plenty of room to sit, kneel or stand on as it is over 4-feet wide and can hold up to 1,700 pounds.

"You can paddle together in formation or not. The choice is yours," says Kelly.

Another option is to request an anchor to park the paddleboard out on the water. "You can use it as a floating island to swim off,"

says Kelly. "It provides different opportunities."

Each person gets a paddle and a life vest to wear. All parties must be friends or family.

"We don't put strangers on together," says Kelly. "Everyone is with people they know."

Amelia Jenness, 7, of South Huntington went on the Mothership during the junior summer program at the WaterFront Center.

"We anchored out in West Harbor and jumped off into the water with our life jackets," she says. "The most fun was jumping off and then struggling to get back on. Sometimes the hardest part was paddling in the breeze, but the instructors did most of it."

The Mothership is available to rent Tuesday-Sunday from 9 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. for \$100 per hour. The anchor rental is an additional \$25. The watercraft is for ages 5 and older; children younger than 18 must be accompanied by a parent or guardian.

1 West End Ave., Oyster Bay, 516-922-7245, [TheWaterFrontCenter.org](http://TheWaterFrontCenter.org).



The Mothership, a 17-foot paddleboard that can hold up to six people, can be rented at the WaterFront Center in Oyster Bay.