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A commitment to something bigger than yourself

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Quad 136



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A Commitment to Something Bigger than Yourself

This story is about typical Johnnies.

Chris grew up in Wisconsin in an intact middle-class family. In high school he was a good student and an avid soccer player. He has an identical twin, Dave, who he loved and competed with throughout high school.

They were not planning on going to college together but when their two different first choice colleges dropped out of consideration for various reasons, each happily opted for their number two that now became number one: Saint John's.

Despite eventually earning a master's degree in philosophy, academics were not a dominant consideration in Chris's college choice. He sheepishly admits that having a gym literally steps from his freshman dorm played an outsized role in choosing Saint John's.

Dave, too, was much more focused on his love of soccer than on any of the course offerings that might prepare him for his eventual Ph.D.

First year was fine and relatively uneventful. The twins wanted a little distance from each other, but fate would only allow them to get so far apart: Chris was on 3rd Tommy and Dave on 2nd Tommy. With both being on the short wing, almost on top of each other, the rooms conveniently allowed for yelled communications out the window and the passing of clothes between floors.

They both played soccer for Coach Pat Haws. They made friends on their floors and settled into the academic routine. They got teased as Cheeseheads by the Minnesotans. They were happy

to be Johnnies. Typical stuff.

Sophomore year Chris found himself settled but not fulfilled. Like so many Johnnies, once he had the time management down, he discovered he had time for other activities, some of which were social, naturally, but he was also looking for something with a little more meaning to engage his time. He heard about the Big Brothers program on campus and decided to sign up. Johnnies were paired with local boys, mostly in St. Joe, as cars were less common in the 1990s. Chris got paired up with TJ.



TJ and Chris in 1993

A little younger than most Little Brothers, TJ was five. He lived with his single mom who had

unexpectedly found herself pregnant. His father was not around. His mother thought that an adult male would be a good influence, and a young, fit Johnnie would be able to keep up with TJ's energy. With multiple siblings, Chris was game, even if none were as young as TJ. They did the usual Big Brother, Little Brother things when a college campus is your playground: hiking, using the gym, going to athletic events, hanging out.

They became close and TJ's mom expressed her appreciation to Chris for the role he was playing in her son's life. But, of course, college life moves on. Chris became a senior. Typically, as the Big Brother gets ready to graduate, the Little Brother (and his parents) decide if they want to continue in the program, and, if so, a new Big Brother gets assigned.

Here Chris made a bold decision for a footloose, soon to be 22-year-old college student: he made a lifelong commitment to TJ that changed both their futures.

Though naturally looking beyond Collegeville to his own future, it would have been understandable, easy and perfectly acceptable to allow TJ to get matched up with another random Johnnie. But Chris not only felt close to TJ, he also saw that this 8-year-old might benefit from some special attention from someone who understood his background and needs.

Chris recruited a sophomore that he had come to know and respect to be TJ's new Big Brother. Smart, fun and thoughtful, Chris knew his friend Matt would help TJ grow to be confident and kind. Matt joyfully stepped into the role—both providing continuity for the boy but also a continued connection to Chris. TJ's mom was delighted as this odd little family grew.

For the next two years, Matt provided the fun, support and male role model for TJ. Chris stayed in touch with both TJ and his mother but was not able to be physically present, save occasional visits to campus. As Matt approached graduation, the same transition question arose though now two "surrogate" fathers had a stake in TJ's future.

The solution was actually easier at this juncture. The growing family stayed all in the family.

Chris's twin, Dave, was returning to Saint John's to work in Campus Ministry and coach Bennie soccer, so the now 11-year-old TJ got a third Big Brother, whom he had already known for years. Dave spent several years in Campus Ministry and the three committed Johnnies got TJ (and his mom) into his early teenage years before other commitments finally took all three men away from Collegeville as their post-graduate horizons broadened.

Even as distance made TJ's relationship to his Big Brothers more challenging, the emotional ties were tightened as the three Johnnies had their own deep connections to each other, one of which was love of this growing boy.

The ties became more like blood relations, as TJ's mom made these relationships a priority too. Though on a modest income, she found a way to get herself and her son to England, Washington DC, El Salvador, New York and Spain on separate visits that showed TJ how to be adventurous and brave, and reminded him of how important it was to stay in touch with his Big Brothers, regardless of where they were working or studying.

When it came time for college, TJ's path was more like that of a second or third generation student than that of the first-generation student he was. Because he had spent years growing up on the Saint John's campus, mentored by young men for whom college was an automatic next step and not truly a choice, TJ automatically assumed college was in his future, too.



TJ's college graduation w/his 3 Big Brothers in Marshall, MN in 2010

Again, his heroic mother made it financially possible, so TJ got a bachelor's degree from Southwest Minnesota State University in Marshall and eventually a graduate degree, just like his three Big Brothers.

None of the adults in his life think this outcome would have been likely without that fortuitous Big Brother connection at age five and the tripartite commitment that followed.

Each of these four men have attended the others' weddings, including TJ's, and this uniquely Johnnie family stays in touch now 25 years on, a tribute to the power of committing to something bigger than yourself, a beautiful *atypical* Johnnies' story that has touched far more than five lives.

And it is a story that the three Brothers believe was uniquely inspired by the Benedictine emphasis on community and service.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | April 22nd, 2019 | Categories: [Uncategorized](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).