

Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly works to rectify senior isolation

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There is a local nonprofit organization in San Francisco that truly embraces the loving spirit of any season called Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly, or LBFE.

The organization bridges an isolation gap that many elders unfortunately endure. There are 25,000 seniors over 65 years old living in isolation. This does not include homeless seniors. By 2030, that number is estimated to be 20 percent higher.

That is why it is so significant to know that Little Brothers exists in San Francisco. Towards the end of World War II, a French nobleman by the name of Armand Marquiset wanted to form a group to serve isolated and lonely elderly people who had lost their families in the war. He called it, "Little Brothers of the Poor."

"The greatest poverty," Marquiset often said, "is the poverty of love" — which was reflected in the motto "Flowers before Bread."

That organization came to the U.S. in 1959 and has also spread to nine other countries around the world. Seven states in the U.S. have Little Brothers chapters.

The impact of Little Brothers in San Francisco has been growing at a fast rate. They have 500 elders in their database and 200 elders who were actively served during 2016. More than 100 elders are paired with an ongoing friend, in which they go on outings to museums, shows or parks, and watch movies, play games, or anything that suits the wishes of the elders.

When I sat with the Executive Director Cathy Michalec and Program Manager Andrew Butler of the Little Brothers San Francisco chapter, I immediately got the sense that these two people were kind and committed to this cause. Both were all smiles and could not say enough good things about the organization and its mission.

When I first entered their office on Nob Hill, Michalec and Butler were buzzing away at their desks — typing, answering phones, or meeting with volunteers. It was clear these two were passionately carrying out the mission of Little Brothers.

Michalec has a history of growing small nonprofits successfully. When I asked her why she liked Little Brothers, she said without hesitation, "The mission of the program." Cathy loves the fact that the organization is volunteer-driven, small in size, and intergenerational, pairing youths with elders.

However, there are also many elders who volunteer to be Friends of the Elders, with ages ranging between 18 and 72!

When I asked Butler why he liked working for the organization, he said he loved the community factor. He had spent years of his life in Panama, with the Peace Corps, and he learned to

appreciate that culture of elders growing old while living with their families.

I also spoke with a local volunteer, “Katy” — who has been volunteering with LBFE 3 1/2 years. She first became aware of the organization at a volunteer fair for students. She immediately took interest in their simple but essential cause. She joined and began doing monthly visits and going to LBFE parties. When she visited 82-year-old “Sandy” on her birthday, she knew she had met a friend for life.

Katy does not see this as work, but as a rewarding experience, saying that she feels that she gets more out of it than ever expected. According to her, both of them talk on the phone regularly, go on outings, and even went on a hot air balloon ride together.

It is clear that LBFE creates lifelong bonds between people and helps to restore love in the hearts of all ages. Funding is solely sourced from local donors — usually small families or volunteers. The number of volunteers fluctuates and their busiest times are during the holidays.

It is very easy and straightforward to become a volunteer. Simply go to the website at <http://littlebrotherssf.org/> and join up. Then you will receive an email from Butler — who manages the volunteers — with calendar information of home visits, birthdays, and party dates from which you can select those in which you are interested.

Little Brothers and Friends of the Elderly offers a variety of methods to bond elders with friends, and hopefully this will grow to the extent that every elder now living in isolation will no longer be alone.