Melissa:

You're listening to Pull Up A Chair: Stories from 100 years of creating community in Jewish, Baltimore, a podcast created by The Associated Jewish Federation of Baltimore.

Jared Raitzyk:

To me, it never, they never laid it out like 'Okay. After two years it's done.' I think it was just like, he [Seth] was part of my life and that was it.

Seth Katzen:

And after a two year commitment, you just don't say, 'Hey, okay. I fulfilled my obligation.' It's not an obligation at that point. It's 'He's family and I'm family.'

Melissa:

Welcome back to Pull Up A Chair. I'm your host, Melissa Gerr. Each month we explore a different theme that illustrates how for 100 years and counting The Associated Jewish Federation of Baltimore has been a place to turn to in times of struggle or celebration, and for assistance and connection. You'll probably hear some familiar voices as we laugh, reminisce and learn a thing or two about what it means to build and be a part of a strong Jewish community. In this episode, we hear about a special relationship and learn why being a constant in someone's life can quite literally make a world of difference. The story starts with Jared Raitzyk, whose father was killed when Jared was just an infant. When he was seven years old, Jared's mother reached out for assistance to the Jewish Big brother, Big Sister program overseen by Jewish Community Services (JCS) an agency of The Associated. The program provides one-on-one mentoring, guidance, support and friendship to Jewish children and teens. And at about the same time, Seth Katzen was searching for a way to give back to his community.

Seth Katzen:

My wife, who was born and raised in Baltimore wanted to get us involved in The Associated. And I knew nothing. So she hosted a focus group for young adults to learn more about The Associated and the one thing that piqued my interest was the Big Brother League. And I thought I can do it at my age. And we were newlyweds, no children yet. I had some time and I thought I can have some impact being a Big Brother,

Melissa:

The history Jared and Seth have shared, and the impact of their big brother, little brother relationship has been immeasurable, really, for both of them. And it's created many memories. One of those memories of course, is about food.

Jared Raitzyk:

He took me to Bill Bateman's out in Towson and it was, it was like my first time having real buffalo wings. Because I told him I like Buffalo wings. I was like seven. And there was an item on the menu called Texas Red-Ass Chile. And he was telling me that this was on the menu. I didn't believe him. Cause I was like, they can't curse on the menu. And then when we opened the menu there, it was. And I was like, Oh, okay. It really was there. But the wings were really good. And that was one of my earliest memories of him.

Seth Katzen:

That actually became a staple. We went not every two weeks, but we went quite often and that was sort of our signature place. And then we, when we went to Oriole games, we went to movies. What about the time I did the fake review in a newspaper to get your mom's approval, to take you to see a movie?

Jared Raitzyk:

So, so he took me to see Billy Madison. That was like my first PG-13 movie. And the actual movie got like half of a star. That was like the real review. But Seth wrote this like fake review and gave it like five stars. And it was clearly fake and he glued it on top of the magazine and my mom saw it and I mean, she knew it was a fake thing, but it was just so funny.

Seth Katzen:

It was the effort.

Jared Raitzyk:

So she let us go because she was just so impressed that he would take so much time to do thatץ

Melissa:

Taking the timeת and really showing up for each otherת has been the bedrock of Jared and Seth's relationship. They provided comfortת friendship, and even guy-humor for each other for more than 25 years and much more.

Jared Raitzyk:

The one thing I learned was to not take life so seriously. I mean, Seth was constantly trying to embarrass me in places in public places. Ne, not intentionally, but like just goofing around. And like, I would get so embarrassed because like you know, I felt like everybody was watching me, but like in reality, nobody cares what you're doing. There used to be a brand of clothing called Wu Wear. And it was like The Wu-Tang Clan. They had their own clothing brand or something. And we used to, we were going to TJ Maxx and he would be like, 'Can you Wu Wu Wu?'. And it would be like, I would be like, it was so cringey at the point, it's still cringy.

Seth Katzen:

You would walk down a different aisle.

Jared Raitzyk:

I'm, you know, I'm 33. I still am embarrassed talking about it, but just like, that's one thing that I learned from him just to like be more spontaneous and live life in the moment and not worry about what people were thinking.

Seth Katzen:

Life is an adventure and enjoy the ride and, and be present. I think that's probably the most important element and that life is full of hardships. But you tackle them and, and when you have family and a support network, you get over it. And we did, we've done that. My side and Jared's side over the years. Jared was there for my daugher's naming, the boys' bris milah at my boys' bar mitzvahs - you drove up to Delaware for that. Actually you were down in Florida for a few. You came down to Florida whether it was my daughter's bat mitzvah or visiting during winter break, but Jared was sort of part of the family. And after a two year commitment, you just don't say, 'Hey, okay. I fulfilled my obligation.' It's not an obligation at that point. It's 'He's family and I'm family.'

Jared Raitzyk:

He's always been there for me as a supportbeacon I guess. When my mom was dying of lung cancer, like he was one of the first people that I spoke with. And you know, he was, he was ready to just fly right down and be a support system for me. So I really appreciate that.

Melissa:

The friendship and support Jared received from having Seth as a Big Brother, not only helped shape who he is as a young man, but it's motivated him to give back to his Jewish community. For the past decade, Jared has been there through thick and thin for his little brother.

Jared Raitzyk:

I've had Sean, I'm trying to think he was nine years old when I got him. And he's 18 now. No, he's 19 - I'm sorry. We, we do the same kind of stuff. We go to the mall, we go to the movies, we walk around like Fells Point and Hamden. Just all kinds of stuff. We talk a lot. It was really hard at first because he was a quiet kid and I'm very like loud and like out there, but now we, we talk all the time and we're still going strong. It was important for me to volunteer as a Big Brother because I wanted to give back to the community and, you know, Seth made such a big impact in my life and my upbringing. I definitely wouldn't be the same person without him. So I wanted to give that opportunity to somebody else.

Seth Katzen:

Having a program like Jewish Big Brother Big Sister League it's critical because the normal population doesn't think about these things. Jared is an only child. I'm the oldest of three boys. I've had two younger brothers, my whole life and Jared was not going to experience that and not having a father. I provided a friend, an outlet, I don't know if mentor is the word, but he had an outlet, or an additional outlet, to his mom. And growing up, you don't think about these things and how others, what they may be missing in life. And if I was able to provide that little spark for him, why not? And I would be remiss if I didn't thank Jewish Big Brother Big Sister League and JCS, and especially The Associated for providing this program for kids that need it.

Jared Raitzyk:

I'm just going to echo that sediment. Thanks for making me look bad Seth.

Seth Katzen:

[Laughs]

Melissa:

Thanks for listening to Pull Up A Chair. I'm your host, Melissa Gerr. This podcast was produced for you by The Associated: Jewish Federation of Baltimore. From East Baltimore to Forest Park, from Pikesville to Randallstown and beyond, The Associated has been there for the community every step of the way. Don't miss the next episode with more stories from your friends and neighbors in Baltimore's Jewish community. Thanks for listening. You've been listening to Pull Up A Chair: stories from 100 years of creating community and Jewish Baltimore. It's part of The Associated's Centennial celebration.