

Jeff Jardine: Longtime Big Brother mentor eventually became family

BY JEFF JARDINE - JJARDINE@MODBEE.COM

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Pohl

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When Bill Pohl introduces his wife, Diane, as “my little brother’s mother,” he gets the desired bewildered look from his listeners.

The puzzled pawns will pause and utter something like, “Oh ... I understand ... ,” to which Pohl will reply, “You do? Then please explain it to me.”

The exchange can either begin or end there, with a great story or an uneasy exit. The story is worth hearing because Chris Esteves calls Pohl his “brother, dad, friend and employer.” Well, stepdad and now former employer, anyway.

All of which begs for a collective “Huh?” Indeed, all of the labels apply. Esteves forever will be Pohl’s “little brother.” They met when Esteves was 12 and Pohl, who had volunteered through the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program, was matched with him.

Esteves will always be Diane’s son and became Pohl’s stepson when widower Pohl married Diane in 2005. And recently, Esteves took over as the new owner of Pohl Metal Products in Oakdale, a business founded in 1950 by Bill Pohl’s dad, Archie Pohl. Bill bought out his dad in 1972. A unique chain of events means the business will remain in the family, with Bill Pohl now easing into retirement at 71.

The background: A job selling radio advertising compelled Esteves’ mom to move the family to Modesto from Arizona in 1982, after she and Esteves’ dad divorced. Esteves was 4 years old at the time. In 1990 and entering his teens, Esteves said he needed guidance and a male role model.

“Mom’s mom,” he said. “There’s certain things she can’t teach you.”

Meanwhile, muscular dystrophy had claimed the life of Pohl’s 14-year-old son, Mark. His daughter, Christy, had gone off to college. One day, Pohl listened to a presentation from a representative from Big Brothers/Big Sisters at a Rotary Club meeting. The idea intrigued him.

“I felt like I still had something I could pass on so someone,” Pohl said.

About two years passed, though, before Pohl decided to volunteer. When he did, they matched him with Esteves.

They talked, rode bikes and went to ballgames. Pohl, a lifelong skier, introduced Esteves to the slopes. They played tennis. Pohl and his family took Esteves along on camping trips. Esteves still has the pinewood derby car they built together.

Esteves and Pohl were pictured together in a September 1990 story in *The Bee* detailing the financial woes of the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program in Stanislaus County, which folded shortly thereafter. But Pohl continued to spend time with Esteves, and they developed a bond that never wavered even after Esteves graduated from Downey High in 1996, enlisted in the Air Force, got married and became the father of three sons and a daughter. Bill and Sue Pohl attended Esteves’ wedding and were there as well when Esteves’ mom, Diane, remarried.

They kept in touch during tours of duty that took Esteves, who worked on F-15 engines, to England, Kuwait and Okinawa. And whenever Esteves returned to Modesto while in the Air Force, Pohl would tell him he had a job at the metal shop awaiting him. So when the military began scaling back and gave Esteves the option of leaving before the end of his second four-year commitment, it was decision time. He thought about working for one of the major plane manufacturers, including Boeing. Then, one day, he called Pohl.

“All he said,” Pohl said, “was, ‘Were you serious about what you said?’ And I said, ‘What did I say?’ When he told me, I said, ‘Well, yeah...’ ”

Esteves left the Air Force in 2005, returning to the Valley to work for Pohl as planned. But there was more, and not something Esteves or anyone else had planned. His mom divorced while he was overseas. Pohl’s wife, Sue, died in 2004. Diane attended the funeral. Several months later, Pohl – a Harley-Davidson enthusiast – ran into her in Jamestown during the Sierra Hope benefit ride. Soon, they began dating, which stunned Esteves.

“That part of it was a bit traumatic,” he said. “I had a long history with Bill. It was one relationship I didn’t want to mess up down the road.”

“That was touchy,” Pohl said. “Our relationship was between us.”

They worked through it, though. Bill and Diane were married in November 2005. Esteves set about learning the metal business that he now owns. The shop, which has four other employees, produces gates for flood irrigation. It also makes watering devices for poultry, parts for rail cars and numerous other products.

“I didn’t want to sell it to someone who would auction everything off and close the doors,” Pohl said. He said his daughter, Christy Pohl Perez, had no interest in running the shop. “It’s nice to pass it on rather than sell out. I’ve probably been here longer than I thought I would anyway.”

“I’ve been here nine years, and there’s so much to learn,” Esteves, 36, said. “And Bill’s here to teach me.”

Indeed, Big Brother is there for Little Brother, and Little Brother’s mother couldn’t be happier when Bill introduces her that way.

Said Diane Pohl, “He just loves to see the looks on their faces.”



Big Brother match Bill Pohl hangs out with Chris Esteves on their first outing in the early 1990s. Even though the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program ended in Stanislaus County soon after they connected, Pohl continued to spend time with Esteves, who was 12 at the time. Pohl eventually brought Esteves into his family's metal business, and became his stepfather when he married Esteves' mom, Diane, in November 2005. Now, Bill is retiring and has sold the business, Pohl Metal Products in Oakdale, to Esteves. JJARDINE@MODBEE.COM