



Andrew Kessel, left, and Brian Finn.

# Bonded by Jewish Big Brothers, longtime friends to be remembered at Red Sox Jewish heritage game

BY STEVE MARANTZ([HTTPS://JEWISHJOURNAL.ORG/AUTHOR/STEVE-MARANTZ/](https://JEWISHJOURNAL.ORG/AUTHOR/STEVE-MARANTZ/))

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Brian Finn and Andrew Kessel shared a beautiful friendship. Finn, of Peabody, was 32 and Kessel, of Wellesley, was 7 when their “match” was arranged by Jewish Big Brothers

Big Sisters of Greater Boston. That was in 1993. For 31 years, their bond held, through marriages, careers, children, relocation, and life on Earth.

“They were so comfortable together,” said Jamie Lucia, Andrew’s wife. “Andrew loved Brian and looked up to him, and you just knew that Brian was so proud of Andrew. Both were very able to express emotions with each other and be open and supportive.”

“The benefit they got out of JBBBS was amazing,” said Todd Finn, Brian’s brother. “What made it special is that they kept in touch for so long.”

Both died in 2024, Finn of a prolonged illness, Kessel in a tragic accident. Their friendship will be honored May 19 at Fenway Park when JBBBS takes part in the Jewish Heritage Celebration as the Red Sox host the New York Mets.

The Red Sox host the event annually, and about 4,500 fans from numerous Jewish organizations are expected this year. JBBBS is participating for the first time, with about 50 volunteer mentors and their 50 matches – along with administrative staff – expected to attend.

“When the two of them passed away so close to each other, there was an outpouring from their families and friends that really highlighted to us their lifelong connection,” said Lauren

Korn, JBBBS president and CEO. “Going to this event at Fenway Park seems like a good way to honor their memory.”

Finn and Kessel’s match epitomized what JBBBS has tried to accomplish in its 105-year history, she said. “The story is that Andrew was 7 and was facing adversity because his parents were divorcing. Someone in his family decided he could benefit from having a Big Brother.”

Finn had been raised in Peabody, attended Temple Ner Tamid, and had been active in USY, along with his brother Todd and sister Lisa. “His sense of being Jewish was special to Brian,” said Todd. “That’s what drew him to JBBBS. He was unmarried at the time and wanted to be a mentor to someone. Andrew became part of our family. Our holiday events included Andrew.”

After Brian married in 1995, settled in Needham, embarked on a career in technical and internet sales, and fathered two children, nothing changed. Brian and Andrew remained close. “Brian was critical in helping Andrew learn what it was to be a man, and to be a nice well-rounded person,” said Jamie. “He was someone who was reliable and trustworthy and who was willing to take time and be with Andrew.”

Brian’s son, Logan, and daughter, Avery, bonded with Andrew. “As Brian’s kids grew up, Andrew was a mentor to them,” said Todd. Andrew graduated from Northeastern in 2009 with a degree in chemical engineering. Under

JBBBS guidelines, Andrew aged out of his match with Brian when he was 22. Still, their friendship continued, as Andrew went on to law school at Boston College.

“When Andrew started law school, he decided it was time to give back, so he signed up to be a Big Brother,” Korn said. “He asked Brian to be one of his references. Really a cool full-circle moment. When they asked Brian if Andrew would be a good Big Brother, he said, ‘Absolutely’ and said that Andrew was part of his family, that they spoke often, and that the two of them had a lifelong bond.”

After law school, Andrew went to work at Paul Hastings LLP in New York, where he met Jamie, also a lawyer. When Andrew and Jamie married in October 2015, at Lake Louise in Alberta, Canada, Brian was asked to be a groomsman. But he was unable to attend, because of early symptoms of a yet undiagnosed disease that affected his speech and comprehension.

In 2017, Andrew and Jamie moved to California, where Andrew went to work for Gilead Sciences in Foster City near Silicon Valley. He developed a passion for autocross, where drivers race individually against a clock. By 2019, Andrew was regularly competing on local tracks in the Bay Area, as well as tracks throughout the U.S. and one in Portugal. Andrew kept Brian abreast of his racing feats but in 2019, Brian was diagnosed with primary progressive aphasia (PPA), a rare nervous system disorder.

“It crept up over several years,” recalled Todd.

“It’s difficult to diagnose. One of the most frustrating parts of being a loved one is that they can’t definitively pinpoint it on the first go-round. It’s progressive. There’s no medication or cure, nothing you can do to stop it. He lost his speech, he became mute. Things that brought Brian great joy, pictures and photographs, he would smile and you could see he was enjoying the visuals. As the nasty disease progressed, he lost the ability to smile. You didn’t know what was going on in his head.”

Brian was in a care facility in Dedham when Andrew and Jamie visited him in November 2023. “He couldn’t talk to us,” Jamie recalled. “We would say something and if his eyeballs would react, we could tell if he was happy or sad. Andrew was shocked, it was a really hard day for him. He didn’t know how much time Brian had left, and he was trying to focus on memories of when Brian was well.”

Then, on March 23, 2024, while racing at Willow Springs International Raceway in Rosamond, California, Andrew’s vehicle crashed. According to the National Auto Sport Association, he “encountered debris, veered off the racing surface, and continued at a high rate of speed through the dirt runoff area, where it rolled and later impacted a concrete block wall. Emergency personnel performed lifesaving measures that were ultimately unsuccessful.”

Andrew Kessel was dead at 37. Brian's brother and sister chose not to tell him of Andrew's death. "We were afraid it would cause him to decline even more," said Todd. "It was shocking enough for the rest of us to process. It would have upset Brian terribly."

Brian Finn was 63 when he died on August 11, 2024. The proximity in time of Brian's and Andrew's deaths was not lost on their grieving loved ones. "I think that their souls will always be connected," said Jamie. "And I think that the impact they had on us while alive will always be with us."

True enough. Mark Dudek, Andrew's closest friend, is married to Nadiya Oleksiv. After Andrew's death, Nadiya decided to volunteer as a Big Sister.

Jamie was asked what Andrew would say to someone thinking about volunteering. "He would tell them they have an opportunity to really change someone's life," she said. "If there's any chance you could impact someone's life positively, you should do it."

Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters is currently overseeing 400 matches. The organization needs more volunteer mentors. "We are getting calls from Jewish families looking for mentors for their kids at a really tough time for Jewish people to have a safe space to be Jewish and show Jewish pride," said Lauren Korn. ☹

*Volunteers can apply to mentor at [jbbbs.org/volunteer](http://www.jbbbs.org/volunteer) (<http://www.jbbbs.org/volunteer>). For tickets to the Jewish Heritage Celebration at Fenway, visit [mlb.com/redsox/tickets/promotions](http://www.mlb.com/redsox/tickets/promotions) (<http://www.mlb.com/redsox/tickets/promotions/cultural-and-identity-celebrations/jewish-heritage>).*

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