



The mutual benefits of mentorship

Examining the mentor/mentee relationship

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FOR MORE THAN 100 YEARS, BBBS HAS BEEN CONNECTING VOLUNTEER MENTORS WITH YOUTHS AGES 6-18. THE PROGRAM AIMS TO PROVIDE GUIDANCE AND POSITIVE, LASTING EFFECTS ON THE LIVES ON YOUNG PEOPLE.

Big Brothers Big Sisters is one of the most recognizable names in the world of youth mentoring. For more than 100 years, the program has matched adult volunteers ("Bigs") with youths seeking guidance ("Littles"); the program is currently one of the largest donor and volunteer-supported mentoring network in the U.S.

Alan Campbell, a New York resident working as the head of business development for Bloomberg Indices, heard about BBBS of New York City through his job. Three years ago, he officially joined the program and was introduced to his Little, Irving.

"When I first came to New York, I spent probably five years being pretty selfish. I'd go to work, go out to the bars; I was just having fun. There came a point when I realized I could be doing more with my time here; that I had a bit more to offer."

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The evaluation process for acceptance to BBBS is no joke. "The kind of questions they asked me — I've never been in therapy, but I imagine [it's not dissimilar]. They asked things like, 'How was your relationship with your mother?' It was quite an emotional interview for me, actually, because I had a relatively challenging upbringing," Campbell says. "So I kind of had some ideas about what kids go through."

Upon matching with Irving several months after the initial interview, Campbell met with the then ten-year-old and his family— two sisters and a mother — for the first time.

When applying to the program, all Littles must address the issue of why they are looking for guidance. "It's quite a difficult thing to do at that age," says Campbell, explaining that in Irving's case, the young boy was looking for help figuring out how to manage frequent feelings of anger. This self-awareness struck a chord with Campbell. "He was reaching out for somebody," he says.

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The relationship began with a one-year commitment; the pair would meet twice a month for several hours on the weekends and spend the day touring popular spots around New York such as museums or Central Park. Irving, having grown up outside the country, took to the outings with "wide eyes and excitement," Campbell says.

Flash forward three years and the pair is still going strong. Campbell is part of Irving's major life decisions, and he says he hopes to continue a relationship with the boy as he enters high school. "It's a very important relationship," says Campbell. "It's not just a commitment to hang out and take a child to lunch. It's about life's little challenges."

For those looking to enter BBBS or similar youth mentoring programs, Campbell cautions that the commitment isn't to be taken lightly — but he says that the personal rewards are manifold. "It can be challenging, because you have other stuff going on. But the time spent [mentoring] yields so much joy. It's satisfying to see a kid respond when you've invested time in him. Irving is very sharp and he picks things up. When I see him conducting himself differently or being more self-aware because of my influence, it's very gratifying," he says. "I think it will give him a better chance in life."

Earlier this year, the program awarded Campbell the honor of "Big Brother of the Year." His final piece of advice for others interested in mentoring is that making a difference comes from taking action -- not just talking about action. "These days people are pretty selfish with their time," he says. "People will spend time sitting on Reddit when they could be forming real relationships. Sometimes risk equals reward — if you take the risk to form a bond with someone, it will pay off. You get a lot out of a very little investment."