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A Very ‘Grand’ Big Sister

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If we each take a minute to reflect, we could all identify a few special people who helped unlock our hidden potential and in doing so, played a critical role in the trajectory of our lives. I’ve been very fortunate to have many such people in my life, and I’ve always wanted to pay that forward by doing the same for someone else. So after I achieved a personal goal of obtaining my MBA back in 2001, the next goal I set for myself was to become a mentor, and I found a way to do just that through Big Brothers Big Sisters of NYC (BBBS of NYC). After a fairly lengthy and very thorough application process, I was matched with my mentee – who BBBS of NYC calls a “Little” – Najay.

BBBS of NYC plays such an important role in helping parents find role models for their children that they wouldn’t necessarily encounter in their everyday lives – mentors that introduce their children to new experiences and open up their worlds to the possibilities that exist beyond their immediate neighborhoods.

While Najay and I live less than five miles apart, it’s safe to say that our paths probably would never have crossed if it wasn’t for BBBS of NYC and their foresight that we would be a good match. Because while geographically we live very close to each other, we lived in two very different worlds. But despite our differences, we are remarkably similar in our personalities and our approach to life. We are both

strong, fiercely independent women (some would say to a fault) who have big goals in life and are determined to achieve them. So our bond was forged from the beginning.

As in any new relationship, it took some time for Najay and me to feel comfortable being together. I think Najay was a bit skeptical of who I was, why I wanted to spend time with her, and if I was even going to be sticking around long enough for her to care. I, on the other hand, struggled to find a way to connect to a young woman who was growing up in an environment very different than my own and facing challenges beyond what I could have imagined. So we focused on fun activities those first few months – like going to the movies or biking through Central Park – and I got a lot of one syllable answers to my questions as I tried to get to know her better. Those of you with teenagers at home can relate, I'm sure. But the important thing was that we both kept showing up. Week after week, month after month, year after year. And over time, as Najay started to let her guard down and let me in, I found ways to connect with her on her terms; the conversations began to flow more easily and our two worlds started to merge. And key to our success? BBBS of NYC was there to support us throughout the entire process.

Over the next 14 years, Najay and I would come to share the many highs and lows of life together, and we have grown to become sisters in the truest sense of the word. Together, we planned her future and made sure she stayed focused on her goals. I was so proud when Najay became the first person in her family to graduate from high school – a goal that she shared with me during one of our very first meetings. When Najay became a teen mom, I was extremely proud of how the birth of her son, Nazmir, only increased Najay's commitment to pursue her dreams, as she now has an additional goal that she puts above all others – to be a good role model and provide a good home for her son. And despite all that she's already accomplished and everything that she has overcome with tenacity and determination, I know Najay has just begun to show the world (and her son) what she can achieve. I am in awe of her strength, her confidence, her resourcefulness and her resilience. She is my inspiration and it's been my honor to be there to love, encourage and support her throughout the years.

Najay and I graduated out of the BBBS of NYC program back in 2007 but reconnected with them a few years ago when they launched their Alumni program – which taps into the Big Alumni network to help Little Alumni (who aren't so little anymore) prepare for college and the workforce through college prep courses, career panels, networking events, and corporate career days. I was also thrilled when Najay told me that she enrolled Nazmir to get his own Big Brother, recognizing, as her own mother did 14 years ago, that her son could benefit by having another positive role model in his life. Recently, Nazmir was matched with his Big Brother Brad, and I can tell by the big smile that Nazmir has on his face when he talks about going to Central Park or the Museum of Natural History with Brad that his Big Brother is already making a positive impact in his life. I suppose this now makes me a “grand” Big Sister, and I am excited to welcome him into our family. It is my greatest wish that their relationship grows to be as important to them as my relationship with Najay is to me.

Karen Tillson is an alumni Big Sister at Big Brothers Big Sisters of New York City. To become a volunteer mentor or to learn more about Big Brothers Big Sisters of NYC, log onto www.bigsnyc.org or call 212-686-2042.