



How a 13 Year Old From the South Bronx Changed My Life

In this series, professionals thank those who helped them reach where they are today. Read the posts here, then write your own. Use #ThankYourMentor and @mention your mentor when sharing.



On February 27, 1996 I was contacted by the Social Worker at Big Brothers Big Sisters of New York City whom I had met about a month earlier at the agency's office. She called to tell me that I had been matched with a "Little" – my Little! I felt like I had given birth! I was so excited! You see, upon moving to NYC about a year before, I had decided to commit to some type of volunteer work. Big Brothers Big Sisters had a great reputation and seemed to deliver a great program that had impactful experiences for the Volunteers, and the kids seemed to get a lot out of the relationship as well. So I applied. I was interviewed – invasively, intensely and completely appropriately – and I was accepted.

I first met my Little in a conference room at the BBBS/NYC headquarters. He was 13; I was 29. He was black; I was white. He was stone-faced, and I was my usual animated self. He was 6'1, 275lbs; I was 6 ft, 170lbs. He lived in the housing projects in the Bronx, and I lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. He was a student who was on the margin, and I was a young advertising executive. He hardly spoke and that continued for the first 6 months of our relationship. I soon began freaking out. What have I done? I began thinking the agency made a mistake matching me with this kid. He doesn't talk! Can I back out of this? I'm sure this kid wouldn't care. My head would hurt when I got home from our regular meetings, which for some reason he never seemed to miss. I called my Social Worker and explained that there was a problem. She calmed me down and explained the different arcs (or stages) of communication about how a Big and Little form a relationship. She explained that in spite of his quietness, he's showing up – consistently – and that says volumes about what's going on inside his head. She asked me to have patience and continue doing exactly what we've been doing, and I did. Everyday I'm thankful that a calm voice prevailed in those beginning days.

We began to spend a lot of time together. He never missed a date. I sometimes did. He had impeccable table manners, but he'd never thank me for lunch or movie tickets. And then, he began to thank me for everything! He started thanking the cashier in the Duane Reade and the subway ticket clerk. He started emulating my behavior (I assume) because he saw how people reacted to my way of communicating with them. If it worked well for me it should work for him. And it did. He started to laugh at my jokes. We'd play basketball in Central Park. He had an amazing shot and I kind of sucked. Well, not kind of. He taught me about the music he liked and why it was important to him and his generation. I did the same. He began to ask questions about my life and me. He started to call me at home. He called me when he got in trouble in school – actually it was his Guidance Counselor who called but it was my phone number my Little provided. That was a long, unpleasant afternoon, but we talked it through and he listened openly to everything I had to say. He began to laugh, share more about his life and seemed genuinely interested in who I was, where I came from and what I stood for. He was very funny it turned out. I fully and honestly answered any and every question he asked. He was smart, quite smart actually. He never saw the color of people, he just saw people. He also read the newspaper every day. His personality, wisdom and intellect was full of so many contradictions it was very confusing to me. But, before my eyes he was becoming a young man.

My commitment to Big Brothers Big Sisters was for one year. That's all they ask for and they do expect volunteers to honor that commitment. At the end of the first year there was no way I was going to walk away from this kid. We were really just beginning to hit our stride and in my view, he was becoming exceedingly awesome - except when he wasn't. We became a team. We had ups and downs. He was a teenager who was experiencing all that teenagers' experience, for better or worse. But he was changing because of our relationship. That was the most exceptional experience I'd had at that point in my life.

He eventually became very close with my partner (now my husband) and my parents, my brother and his family too. He came to Thanksgiving dinner and birthday parties. He calls my Mom Grandma and they're friends on Facebook.

When he was 16 he called me one night and said he needed my help. He told me that he wanted to get out of NYC and get out of the Bronx because he didn't want to die there. I was stunned, sad. After we hung up the phone, I cried. The desperation in his voice was so real and raw and much more than a 16 year old boy should experience. He was feeling smothered. Trapped. Frustrated. Scared. We talked through what his vision was and what needed to happen to make it a reality. I dove in. That's what Big Brothers do. First up was to graduate from High School, which was a fairly significant challenge that he needed to address immediately. He had to get serious with his school work. To provide some clarity, in the year 2000, the NYC Department of Education had a 51% graduation rate. The following week I was at his High School in the Bronx meeting with his Guidance Counselor – the same one who called me a while back - and we came up with an IEP (Individual Education Plan) that would - providing he stuck to the plan – enable him to graduate on time.

My Little graduated High School with his class – on time. The following fall he attended a small college in upstate New York. He met his college sweetheart. He discovered his passions and executed his academic work to fulfill his professional ambitions. He graduated college, married that same beautiful sweetheart and now their daughter calls me Uncle Jeff (because I refuse to be called Grandpa). My Little is one the most gentle, kind, ambitious, hard-working and loving people I know. My life is much bigger and better because he's in it.

Twenty-two years after walking into the Big Brothers Big Sisters offices, I am now the Vice President of the Workplace Mentoring Center and Corporate Relations at the organization. I left my advertising career after a terrific, fun, rewarding and very stressful career to pay it forward, as some say. My life has definitely come full circle. My responsibilities now have me presenting Big Brothers Big Sisters and the work we do to corporate business leaders. In the Workplace group, we bring teams of High School kids to corporate offices so they can learn about the professional world and gain skill-sets necessary to succeed, whether they find themselves in college or in their first job after high school. That said, 98% of our Workplace kids graduate high school – on time – and enroll in college. Everybody wins.

Abraham Lincoln said, "No man stands so tall as when he stoops to help a child". I think about that all the time because it rings so true when I see the impact of our programs and Volunteers.

I love my work unlike anything I've ever done in my professional life in the past. The stress hasn't gone away, but for some reason it's easier to manage because I'm working for the kids. It's all about the kids. Inner-city kids need help to make it happen. It's easy to do and it'll change your life.

Jeff Elgart is an alumni Big Brother and staff member of 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.bigsny.org or call 212-686-2042.