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Giving Youngsters the Gift of a Mentor's Influence

By BARBARA MARTINEZ



For Leslie C. Quick III, the payoff for his \$500,000 donation to the Newark-based Big Brothers Big Sisters are the stories the staff tells of youngsters who were close to choosing a life of crime, but chose a different path instead because of the influence of a Big Brother or Sister.

"I think mentoring is some of the most powerful work that we can do because you're really changing young lives," said Mr. Quick, who vowed nearly three years ago to give \$100,000 a year for five years in an effort to re-invigorate an organization that only a few years ago was near defunct. Mr. Quick is a founding partner at Massey, Quick & Co., a Morristown, N.J., investment firm.

Among the first steps Mr. Quick and others on the board took in 2008 was to hire Carlos Lejnieks, a former charter-school administrator. Mr. Lejnieks, 33 years old, grew up in Montclair with his single mother, an immigrant from Ecuador who cleaned the homes of upper middle-class Montclair residents, and he often helped her.

He quit high school. If it weren't for one of his mother's clients, who counseled him to go back to school, he might not have finished. Mr. Lejnieks ultimately graduated from Brown University and earned a master's degree from the London School of Economics. He now relentlessly pursues potential big brothers and sisters, asking mere strangers—waiters, people in the grocery store, at the gym—to consider becoming a mentor. "For every 10 people we speak to, we will land three," he said.

Before Mr. Lejnieks arrived, the Big Brothers program in Newark served just over 100 children. Today, the group has more than 1,000. The plan is to grow another 25% before the end of this year.

One of those people who heard Mr. Lejnieks's call was Joel Ruffin, a vice president at Goldman Sachs, who went on to become the New Jersey Big Brother of the Year. When he signed up, he was paired with a 15-year-old named Jaleel. Mr. Ruffin and Jaleel spent time together, but Jaleel didn't talk much. Mr. Ruffin wondered aloud to Mr. Lejnieks if he was really making any difference. Mr. Lejnieks insisted that he was. "Sometimes, you just have to show up," he told him.

After meeting weekly for months, suddenly, Mr. Ruffin couldn't reach the boy, and learned that Jaleel's older brother had been killed on the streets of Jersey City. He worried that Jaleel was considering avenging the murder. Finally, when the two met at a pizzeria, they made small talk for a little while.

Mr. Ruffin paused, and looked at Jaleel, and asked, "How are you doing, little brother?" Jaleel said he was "OK," as a tear rolled down his face. Mr. Ruffin said that moment deepened their relationship. The two still spend a lot of time with each other, talking, among other things, about Jaleel's plans to go to college and study finance.