

A CALL FOR MORE MENTORS

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Description: ABC's Sandra Bookman interviews Big Brothers Big Sisters of NYC CEO, Hector Batista and two volunteering Bigs



[TRANSCRIPT]

It's no secret that matching at-risk youth with a mentor can make a huge difference in their lives, and Big Brothers Big Sisters of New York City has been getting the job done for more than 100 years. But there is always a need for more Big Brothers and more Big Sisters. Here today is executive director, Hector Batista and mentors, or Bigs, Brittany Gilmore and David Ellis. Thank you all for being with us this afternoon. Nice to see you again, Mr. Batista.

Hector Batista: Thank you for having me, Sandra.

Sandra: Look, you know, as I said, you guys do great work, but really getting enough Bigs for all the kids that could use that guidance is part of the struggle sometimes.

Hector: Absolutely, especially -- I mean, in our program, 98% of the kids that are in our program are kids of color. In the African-American community, 43% of our Littles are African-American, and only 13% of the Bigs are African-American, so I think it's important to have role models that come from a similar background because they have sort of been -- they've traveled that journey, and I think it really helps. It's not necessary, but it's important. And for us, it's twofold. I think we want men of color. Men are very tough to get into the program, and then young women of color, who want to become volunteers in the program because it's so important for these young people. And, just to put it into some perspective, our program is so effective: when they have a role model in their life, 97% of our kids are getting promoted to the next grade; ...96% are graduating from high school; 94% of them are going on to college.

Sandra: And those numbers are incredible, especially when you look at, you know... overall the number of kids who are actually graduating.

Hector: Yeah, and if you put it in perspective, in the board of education research, I think in the New York Times, there [were] 70% of the kids that graduated from high school. So, the program is very impactful.

Sandra: And two of the Bigs here today -- I'm already impressed with them. I mean, I'd love for them to be my Big, except I think I'd be the Big for both of you. Brittany, you've been, you said, with the program for a year and a half, what has surprised you most about being a Big? I think your little sister is Nia?

Brittany: My little sister is Nia. I think what surprised me the most is how much fun I have when we have our matches and our outings. It's like Nia is getting to enjoy herself. We're spending a good time together. But I'm doing things that I might not do on a Saturday or Sunday and really enjoying it, so it's a great experience.

Sandra: Now, when you're not being a Big, what are you doing? What's your profession?

Brittany: I am a public health scientist, so I actually work for the Health Department here in the city, in Brooklyn.

Sandra: Which is even more important for a young woman to see somebody doing that job because it opens up the possibilities for them.

Brittany: Exactly. Exactly. And so, being matched with Nia, I've been able to tell her about my experiences in college, in undergraduate school, and then going to graduate school and letting her see, you know, come to my office and see what goes on there, and just having that experience has been really great for her.

Sandra: And have you seen a change in her?

Brittany: I have, I have. When I first met Nia, she was very shy. She was the sweetest child, but she was very shy, and, you know, stayed to herself [and] was quiet. Over the past year and a half, she's become much more outgoing. She's able to say what she wants more and she speaks up for herself, and there's just a presence about her that is much more kind of open than she was before.

Sandra: And you feel good about having had something to do with that?

Brittany: I do. I feel great about it.

Sandra: David, it's your turn. Now, T.J. is your little, right?

David: Yes, indeed.

Sandra: And you... 2014 I think you met him?

David: Yes.

Sandra: Okay

David: So, we've matched for a year and a half. He's 16 years old, lives in the Bronx, and it's just been an amazing experience. I think primarily it's just about being a friend to your little. And I think that's maybe the misperception that people have, that it's a lot of work and a huge time commitment. But I'm here today to say, hey, you know, it's not as big of a time commitment as you think. We end up going to the movies, playing basketball together, all things I really, really enjoy, and he does as well, so it's just been an amazing experience so far.

Sandra: And when you met T.J., what were some of the things that he was dealing with? I mean... she talked about Nia being really shy. Were there some things that you noticed about him immediately, and now you can tell that you've had an impact on those issues?

David: Yeah. So, when we first matched, he was 15 years old, and this is a critical time in a teenager's life, and at first, yeah, he was a little bit timid as well, but I think he's grown so much. We share an interest in technology.

Sandra: Yeah, I read that.

David: Yeah. So I'm able to talk to him about my experiences, you know, pursuing an MBA in technology, so he's definitely taken a lot from me and my professional background as well and learned a lot.

Sandra: Do you get the sense that knowing you, spending time with you has really opened up his eyes in terms of what the possibilities might be for his life?

David: Absolutely. So, I'm also part of an organization called MLT -- Management Leadership for Tomorrow. I applied to business school through the consortium. So, I think these are opportunities that he wouldn't have known about otherwise. And, I've been able to talk to him about it and let him know, "hey, there's some great companies, great schools out there that are doing the things that you want to do and move forward." so I think initially he wanted to be a professional wrestler.

[laughter]

Sandra: He's 15.

David: I know. And now, you know, he's thinking about the possibilities in technology, so it's been fantastic.

Sandra: So, look, I'm assuming that's why you brought these guys with you today, because they're perfect examples of what you're looking for. But when you hear them talk about that, that is exactly what Big Brothers and Big Sisters is supposed to be about.

Hector: You're absolutely right. I mean, I get the pleasure of listening to these young people, these Bigs that are in our program, and every day I'm inspired by them because these two young people have full-time jobs, and they took time out to be on this show just

because they understand the impact that they're having on a young person's life. What's interesting about our program is we create what we call smart goals, where the Little and the Big sort of negotiate some of the things that they're working on. Brittany's Little in particular, she was shy. She wanted to work on those things, so that's something that they work on. And, we try to create activities or encourage the Bigs to take them on activities to sort of get them out of their comfort zone, to get them out to sort of do some of those things. But for me, I mean, they put me on a mission. I mean, just to see these young people, I'm talking to them, I'm inspired by them, just what they do.

Sandra: So, what are the requirements for Bigs? And I would assume you have, like, an overflow of kids.

Hector: We do. I mean, right now we are -- since I took over the organization, we went from 2,800 kids that we [were] servicing. That was about 4 1/2 years ago. We're now servicing 5,400 kids. So we've doubled the amount as part of our strategic plan. So there's a tremendous need. In New York City, there are about 280,000 single-family households, and that's kind of our sweet spot of families that we're trying to service. So the need is tremendous, and for us, it's really more along the lines of the African-American [and] the Latino community are the areas that we're trying to target. To become a Big, you have to commit to one year, eight hours a month, and they go through one of the most thorough background checks in the country because, obviously, a mother or a parent gives us their child to be mentored, and we want to make sure that our volunteers are properly screened and they've passed that test. And then what we do is we provide the kind of training that they need and support through our master-level social workers, so it's a three-legged stool -- it's the Big, the Little, and the social worker that sort of work together.

Sandra: Now, you said at least they have to give you a year. You've already been -- what -- a year and a half?

Brittany: A year and a half.

Sandra: And you, two years.

David: Almost two years, yeah.

Sandra: Yeah. And you guys envision sticking around a little bit longer than that, I guess?

Brittany and David: Yes.

Brittany: And it's funny that you say that. Nia and I were just together, and we were talking about --she's about to graduate elementary and go to middle school, and we were just talking about what we'd be doing when she graduates high school. So we're in it for the long haul.

Hector: And, Sandra, when we get them, when we get a volunteer, they get so committed to the mission and the impact. We probably average about 26 months. That's our average in terms of match length. So it really -- the volunteers, the Bigs, want to see the Littles succeed and go on to graduate high school and go on to college.

Sandra: And how often do Littles come back and be Bigs?

Hector: You know, we see that often. I mean, I have a board member on my board who's been matched with his little for 45 years. He went to his Little's wedding and just went to his Little's son's wedding, so it's like the relationship -- they become part of the family. And so we see that commitment, an extended family. I see them shaking their heads in the affirmative.

Sandra: And if you want to find out more about becoming a Big?

Hector: Sure, you go on to our website.

Sandra: Bigsnyc.org?

Hector: Correct.

Sandra: Okay. And that'll tell you how to get signed up, about the training, and all that stuff?

Hector: And you come to an orientation. We're open on Saturdays. We make it easy for people. You could do it online. We try to really meet people where they are and you know, obviously I want to thank you for having us on this show.

Sandra: It's such a great program, and we thank you for coming in the middle of your work day. Like I said, I want -- can I be your Big?

[laughter]

Sandra: Thank you so much.

Hector: Thank you.

Sandra: I have no doubt I will see you again, Hector.

Hector: For sure.