



## **It Started With a Mutual Love for Video Games. Then My Life Changed**

*In this series, professionals thank those who helped them reach where they are today.*

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I was once asked, if you could go back to any point in your life right now, in your present form, what age would you go back to and what would you tell yourself?

Hearing the question, I almost laughed because it was just too easy. I would go back to my 10-year-old self, and I would tell him that the problems his mom and dad were having were not his fault. I would tell him that he had

othing to do with his father leaving. I would tell him that his father not showing up to spend time with him when he promised he would was not a way to for his father to get back at him, but a way for his father to get back at his mom. I would tell him to stay focused on school, remain positive, and should any negative thoughts about himself creep in, do not believe them.

I stumbled into Big Brothers Big Sisters of NYC (BBBS of NYC) at the age of 11. I had an interview with a social worker who told me the purpose of our talk was to find me a Big Brother. I remember thinking to myself: ‘a what?? Great. On top of everything else, now I have officially become a charity case.’ I refused and wanted no part of it. After much pleading and prodding from the social worker and my mom, I reluctantly agreed, though I still had many reservations.

I finally met my so-called Big at the age of 12: Cazembe Bektemba. I can still remember my first thought upon meeting him: ‘yeah, I’m already almost as tall as this guy.’ We sat and talked for a few minutes and while I don’t remember much of the conversation, I do remember distinctly perking up when he asked me about video games. I found out that he liked and played them, too. We had a long way to go, but it was certainly a start.

More than 20 years will pass, and I still have a friendship that has grown only from that fateful night at BBBS of NYC. The hardest part for me was to trust...to trust him and to trust the process. Would he show up when he said he would? Would he come to my neighborhood, which, at the time, was the worst of the worst? What is his real motivation for wanting a little brother?

I had to let my guard down in order for the friendship to work and that was no easy task for me. It took time, but once that was done, I was able to feel the impact Cazembe was having on my life. My grades improved; my mindset improved; heck, my video game skills improved. And perhaps the most valuable lesson? Cazembe taught me that it is best to be selfless than selfish.

I now work at the I.T. Department of BBBS of NYC, allowing me the opportunity to have a hand in helping create these wonderful relationships. The servers, computers, and mobile devices that I support all help the agency perform more efficiently, so that it can continue serving today’s youth and find the adults who are committed to making a positive difference in someone’s life. Volunteering for agency events always brings me back to when I was a Little in this program. How many people can say they are now working at the very place that saved their life?

I was once asked, if you could go back to any point in your life right now in your present form, what age would you go back to and what would you tell yourself? I’m laughing right now because this question is just too easy. I would go back to my 10-year-old self. I would tell him what Cazembe Bektemba showed me – that everything is going to be OK.

***Damon Cocklin is a past Little Brother and current 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.bigsnyc.org](http://www.bigsnyc.org) or call 212-686-2042.***

