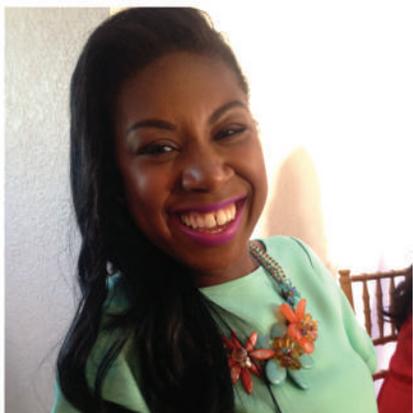




## Making a Connection

*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.*



### Written by illyana jones

**BBBSNYC Mentor  
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It's the later part of the school year at Ethel M. Burke elementary school, 3rd grade. I'm 8 and this is my third school in six months. We've just left the shelter where at my last school, I was bullied. I cried every day. I missed my great grandmother; I missed my church friends and singing in the choir; I missed my dad and I missed the only home I had ever known. I miss when my mom actually got out of bed to do things. I'm terrified. I've never had a hard time fitting in or making friends but my last school was brutal. Will the kids like me? Will I do well in my classes? The list of questions goes on and on and on, but we do have an apartment now. That's a start.

I don't remember all the details, but I remember I started school and people were nice, really nice. It helped. The brightest spot in a sea of comfortable though is the music. I sang at church and I loved it. Music was and is my first love. When Ms. Ramick from the middle school

came twice a week to work with the 3rd and 4th graders, I was ecstatic. She loved me, she nurtured me and I couldn't wait to get to 5th grade to join the Bell Oaks Upper Elementary Chorale. I got there too. Even as a young starting member, I excelled and Ms. Ramick was really there for me. Once we left the shelter, things didn't automatically get better. My dad moved in with us but things between him and my mom weren't always pleasant. I was still very far from my great grandmother and my church and we didn't have a car. The chorale was my refuge. We traveled, competed, and won. When I didn't have enough to pay my dues, Ms. Ramick made up the difference. When I couldn't afford McDonald's like everyone else (my mom would make me a sandwich instead), she'd buy me something so I wouldn't feel left out. When it was dark outside after long dress rehearsal practices, we still didn't have a car, she'd give me a ride home. When I'd come to school puffy and swollen from crying all night, she'd hug me but not push. She had an amazing way of being there for me even when we were silent. Ms. Ramick was always there. Being a mentor for Big Brothers Big Sisters of NYC is my way of paying it forward in her honor. In being a mentor, I realize that it's not just for my mentees benefit but mine as well.

One of the biggest lesson I've learned from my mentee is patience. You grow up hearing patience is a virtue but when it comes to children – my mentee is 8 – it really is. I see her impatience sometimes and it makes me want to be more patient to set a good example for her. In the same regard, mentoring has its ups and downs. The most challenging aspect is straddling the line between friend and adult. You want to be their friend because you want them to trust and like you, but at the end of the day, you are tasked with keeping them safe. That means saying no sometimes. Connecting can be an issue sometimes as well. The best way to connect with your mentee is investing the time getting to know them. If someone knows that you really care about the things they are saying, they are more likely to open up. Patience can be applied here as well. Gaining trust takes time so you must be patient in getting to know your mentee.

Mentoring truly is one of life's great experiences. It allows you to connect with another person and learn new things not only about them, but about yourself. In mentoring, I've learned that I connect to the human experience. Before mentoring, I don't think that I would have been able to assess my understanding of other people and their struggles because mine were so great. Now, if asked, I'd say that I am more confident about my story and how it relates to others. I operate with empathy.

***Illyana Jones is a 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/BeABig](http://www.bigsnyc.org/BeABig) or call 212-686-2042.***