



Big Brother Aids Youth With Big Steps

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When the Times Square area was suggested as a place to meet Fernando Luciano and Erik Lopez, I was surprised. I would have assumed that the challenge for 34-year-old Mr. Luciano would be to keep Erik, 12, as far away from Times Square—even the new and improved Times Square—as possible.

After all, they're members of Big Brothers Big Sisters of New York City, the city's largest youth-mentoring program, serving 3,600 children below the poverty line in single-parent households.

Shouldn't Mr. Luciano be taking Erik to—I don't know—the American Museum of Natural History or the park? Instead, we arranged to meet at [Dave & Buster's](#), a sports bar on West 42nd Street.

Dave & Buster's allure would eventually become apparent.

First we talked. I ordered a beer, the gentlemen drinking nothing more potent than Cokes.

I've been familiar with Big Brothers since I was a child (after 110 years, it's one of the city's longest-running nonprofits) from ads that must have run on TV during the '60s.



Mentor for 12-Year-Old Puts Priority on School Work

Eric Lopez, left, with his Big Brothers Big Sisters of NYC mentor Fernando Luciano
RALPH GARDNER/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Those ads stuck with me. Even as a child, they made me realize how lucky I was to have two parents in the next room. Though my father wasn't the most understanding soul when he awaked at dawn by the sound of a basketball bouncing off the wall between our bedrooms.

Mr. Luciano has been mentoring Erik, whose father died when he was 5, for the last four years. He picks the boy up once a month at the Queens home he shares with his mother and three sisters, but also keeps in weekly touch with him over the phone.

"Sometimes we'll have to go over school things—figure out what he needs to do, before we go on an outing," said Mr. Luciano, a partner in Unique Visuals, a Manhattan printing and graphics company. "We're going to be speaking a little bit more now to make sure the grades are where they need to be."

Erik acknowledged with a slight nod that his grades aren't all they could be at the moment. "He's much brighter than I think I was at 12," Mr. Luciano added supportively. "Sometimes you think you're talking to an adult."

Erik acknowledged the importance of his relationship with Mr. Luciano, who is married but doesn't yet have children of his own. "I'd be a different type of person," he said. "I would be a bad student. If you don't have a father type like Fernando...people like him show you what's right from wrong."

Mr. Luciano said that, with Erik's consent, he hopes to continue mentoring him for a while. "It would mean a lot to me to see him through high school and college."

According to Big Brothers, among young people in its programs 97% graduate from high school. Of those, 86% are accepted into college. "Without the program it's low 50%," Mr. Luciano said.

Mr. Luciano offered an incident a few years ago as an example of the support he tries to give Erik and his family. "He had a situation at school where he was being bullied," Mr. Luciano recalled. "Erik's mother was very concerned."

Erik declined to discuss the incident—it was apparently still too painful. But Mr. Luciano said he made it clear to school officials, through Erik's mother, that he would become involved if they didn't take steps to stop the bullying.

Besides Dave & Buster's, the two have attended Yankee games—prime field-level seats—and a celebrity-studded Big Brothers gala at the Waldorf where Erik met New York Giants wide receiver Victor Cruz. "We had

tuxedos,” Mr. Luciano reported. They were also part of a group that rang the bell at the New York Stock Exchange.

“Big Brothers does a remarkable job of getting activities organized,” Mr. Luciano said. “At little or no cost.”

But this afternoon was on him. “They don’t like us to do extravagant things,” he explained. “If you spend a lot of money, a lot less people are going to get involved.”

We moved across the hall from the restaurant area to a games arcade. It had the excitement of a highflying Las Vegas casino, but with videogames instead of blackjack tables and one-armed bandits.

Games such as “Terminator Salvation.” The goal, I gathered, was to destroy as many cyborgs as possible while not mistakenly shooting any members of your own army.

I was pleased to see that Mr. Luciano didn’t go easy on Erik, defeating him 16-12. However, I like to think I contributed to the young man’s blossoming self-esteem and did my small part to support Big Brothers Big Sisters of NYC by losing to him, 17-9.

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