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Mentorship Program Honors Jackson Heights Resident as 'Big of the Year'

By Katie Honan



JACKSON HEIGHTS — Tiffany Ford was looking for someone solid for her shy 10-year-old son, Spencer, when she signed him up for the Big Brothers, Big Sisters of New York City mentorship program nearly five years ago.

"As a single mom, I really was looking for a male mentor," she said. "I wanted commitment and stability."

Spencer was matched that year with Mark Zustovich, the chief public information officer for the Department of Youth and Community Development who had mentored years before in New Jersey.

He took Spencer to baseball games, on hiking trips and to hang out in the park. They talked about life and school.

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Zustovich's year-long commitment turned into five years, and counting.

On Thursday, he was honored as the "Queens Big of the Year," as the program cut the ribbon on its new Jackson Heights location. The space, at 82-11 37th Ave., furthers their commitment in the borough, the organization said.

Zustovich, who was awarded a plaque with a photo of him and Spencer, said he was humbled by the honor.

He's been a constant friend to Spencer, a cancer survivor who attends school at Holy Cross High School in Flushing, according to Ford.

"He's that rock Spencer can hang to, he can call when he's upset," she said. "He's the calm to Spencer's storm."

Hector Batista, the chief executive officer of BBBS of NYC, said Zustovich's and Spencer's relationship is inspirational for other mentors and mentees in the program.

"I remember when Spencer came in..his self-esteem was down. Now you see him, he's standing tall, his voice is deeper," he joked.

"The impact that Mark has had in his life, you can see it."

The program is celebrating National Mentoring Month and hopes to register more volunteers, preferably more male mentors and female mentees.

They currently have more woman wanting to be mentors than girls taking part in the program, and not enough male mentors, he said.

For Zustovich, who lives in Jackson Heights, working with Spencer has kept him young.

"Over time you forget what it's like to be young," he said. "I learn from him. It's a win-win situation."

For Spencer, the impact has been deep, too.

"I've learned how to grow up, how to live correctly," he said.
