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Big brother makes a big difference: Jackson Heights man honored by Big Brothers Big Sisters of NYC

By Etta Badoe



When 10-year-old Spencer Ford met Mark Zustovich back in November 2011 through Big Brothers Big Sisters of NYC he didn't really know what to expect from the relationship.

"I expected to learn the basics of life," he said.

But more than four years on, Spencer, a cancer survivor who attends Holy Cross High School in Flushing and lives with his mother and siblings in South Jamaica, not only got to cut the ribbon at the opening of the organization's new office in Jackson Heights on Jan. 28, he also got to stand proudly by as Zustovich, his "big," as the mentors are commonly known within the program, was named "Queens Big of the Year."

"I feel like a father talking to his son, really proud of Mark," Spencer said. "I believe he deserves it. He has been the best big brother I could ever ask for."

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“I really appreciate this honor,” Zustovich said. “I’m humbled by it.”

From boosting Spencer’s confidence and guiding him as he grows up to making sure to spend time with him almost every weekend and calling him every evening to teaching him photography, Zustovich, a resident of Jackson Heights and chief public information officer for the city Department of Youth and Community Development, has become an indelible part of Spencer’s life.

“I really do trust Mark with, like, everything,” he said. “I really wouldn’t be as good as I am in my academic career and everything.”

The appreciation is mutual.

“I can’t tell you what it’s done for my life,” Zustovich said of mentoring Spencer. “It’s been a wonderful match. I look forward to being with Spencer for as long as possible.” Zustovich began mentoring when he was still living in New Jersey and continued when he moved to New York about 10 years ago. He sees the role of a mentor as a long-term commitment.

“I couldn’t stop it there,” he said of their relationship once Spencer turns 18. “No way. I don’t think it ends once you become an adult. I like to think of it as an ongoing commitment to someone’s life.”

To commemorate their time in the program, the two began an annual tradition of creating a photo book with memories from each year.

“This is an amazing example of what our volunteers are able to do with young people,” Hector Batista, chief executive officer of BBBS of NYC, said. “At the end of the day it really takes a special person like Mark to really dedicate themselves to that person.”

The award is part of a series of celebrations for BBBS of NYC’s National Mentoring Month. As part of the festivities, the organization arranged ceremonies to honor its “Borough Bigs of the Year” for each borough throughout New York City.

Batista hopes the relationship developed between Spencer and Mark and others like it serve as an inspiration for New Yorkers and encourages them to sign up as a big brother or sister.

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According to the organization, 97 percent of the kids who join the program are promoted to the next grade; 96 percent graduate high school; and as of last year 94 percent of the “littles” are going to college. Besides the mentors, the group also provides educational services, counseling and case management.

But it is the relationships developed between bigs and littles that create the biggest impact in young people’s lives.

“When a child is in our program they just do so much better,” Batista said. “Our challenge is that we have more boys waiting for big brothers and we need more girls to be recruited because we have more women volunteers.”

Which is why BBBS of NYC chose Jackson Heights as its new location in Queens. Not only because of its accessibility, but because officials see a need.

“It’s a diverse community and it’s a community we want to target,” Batista said. “With the amazing support of the Queens community, I am confident we will be able to take our organization’s services in this borough to new heights.”

Spencer, already looking ahead to high school and beyond, hopes to serve his community and make things better for people. He hopes to become a police officer one day.

“Imagine if every New Yorker just took one child,” Mark said. “Just one and imagine the change it would make.”

More information about Big Brothers Big Sisters of New York City, including how to sign up as a mentor or mentee, is available at bigsnyc.org.
