

May 30th, 2016

EXCLUSIVE: Former Marine recruits veterans to mentor at-risk New York City kids

By Lisa L. Colangelo



This former Marine is looking for a few good men and women to mentor New York City kids.

M.

Diego Romero, who once recruited Marines, is now recruiting veterans to guide youngsters for Big Brothers Big Sisters of NYC.

The nonprofit matches at-risk kids from around the five boroughs with role models to help them navigate school and life.

“Being a veteran myself, I really understand how the mentoring experience of a service member is full circle,” said Romero, 33, who is married and has a 2-year-old daughter.

Former gangbangers act as mentors to troubled NYC kids

“You really need someone to take you under their wing and show you the ropes. And then you are doing that for the next generation.”

Romero said veterans are uniquely qualified to work with youngsters in the program who often come from single-parent households and lack positive role models in their lives.

“Veterans have a lot of life experience at a young age,” said Romero. “Many mentors are straight out of college and interested in giving back. Veterans have potentially seen a lot more.”

Hector Batista, chief executive officer of Big Brothers Big Sisters of NYC, agreed.

“Veterans are ideally suited to being mentors because of their work ethic, leadership qualities, selflessness and aptitude for working as part of a team,” Batista said.

“By focusing our efforts on recruiting veterans as volunteers, we will be able to provide many more children across New York City with role models they can rely on.”

Romero enlisted in the Marine Corps in 2004 and served in Iraq before coming back to the U.S. and working as a recruiter.

“It was a challenge,” he admitted. “Not a lot of people during a time of war are interested in joining the Marines.”

After he left the service, Romero worked at several corporate jobs in public relations and advertising. But the sociology major said he longed to make an impact in the community.

As Romero travels the city recruiting for Big Brothers Big Sisters of NYC, he tries to battle some of the misconceptions people have about volunteering for the program.

M.

“People think they don’t qualify as mentors — they don’t think they are as accomplished as they should be,” he said. “But the secret to mentoring is that there is no secret.”

Others are afraid of making a time commitment, even though it’s only twice a month.

The program serves about 5,000 kids every year but there is also a waiting list. The greatest need is for male mentors since 75% of the kids waiting are boys.

Romero said there is marked successes — 97% of the youngsters in the program get promoted to the next grade.

“The average match is 26 months but we have countless matches that stay together for the rest of their lives informally,” he said. “This is a chance to create a friend for the rest of your life and give back to the community.”

