

# The Miami Herald

## Long-awaited home opens for Big Brothers Big Sisters

*April 4, 2016  
By David Neal*



Most ribbon-cutting ceremonies feature about as much true emotion as a GPS voice. But when Carnival Cruise Lines CEO Arnold Donald and Big Brothers Big Sisters of Miami President Lydia Muniz did the big

ceremonial snip Monday for the Carnival Center for Excellence, it wasn't once more without feeling.

"Coming in last night and thinking about it this morning, I was 'OK, I've got to be strong. I don't want to break down,' " Muniz said. "But when Arnold and I cut the ribbon, it got to me. I...I..." Muniz started to choke up again. "I realized the dream was really true. It's been a labor of love.

"My heart is very filled with joy."

The joy comes not just from the Miami Heat Big Fitness room, where Little Brothers and Sisters ("Littles") can work out; the computer lab, where Littles, many of whom either don't have laptops or home internet access, can work; or an area for multimedia creation out of which DJ Irie's Music Academy and Spin University will work.

The joy comes from the nonprofit finally getting the home leaders told Muniz they wanted when she started there in 1988.

"We were the only one of the major youth serving organizations that did not have its own home," Muniz said. "The Boys and Girls Clubs, the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts and so on, the Ys...we're in the same league, if you will, of youth development organizations, but we were the only ones that did not have a permanent home."

During the 1990s, Muniz and Carnival's Linda Coll met and Carnival started making yearly \$5,000 corporate contributions. That's metamorphosed into a full-blown relationship with the company providing 100 mentors, scholarships and a \$5 million contribution to the purchase of the building at 550 LeJeune Rd.

Coll, now executive director of the Carnival Foundation, said the company decided "We need to make an investment so they can not only do matching (of Bigs with Littles), but can provide direct services."

The first floor opened Monday. The second and third floors remain under construction.

Northwestern High senior Keno Tate heads from Liberty City to Bethune-Cookman University in the fall after three years being mentored by Miami Beach's Gregg Zalkin, a Carnival senior manager.

“I believe it’s going to open up many doors for many kids,” Tate said. “You have the computer room with Macs and PlayStations for kids, not just to beat them up about school, but they can have some down time. Laptops so they can do their homework. We were all branched across different places around the community. But, now, this is home. Everybody who cares about us and everybody who wants to see us do better are all in one spot.”

Carol City High senior Crystal Proctor certainly brought real emotion. She won a \$10,000 scholarship as the high school division’s winner of an essay contest “How My Big Has Positively Impacted My Life.” Proctor, who will be the first in her family to go to college when she attends Clark Atlanta University, was so excited, she started reading her essay halfway through.

Amaya King of Miami Lakes Educational Center and Martin Minard of North Miami High, the other two high school finalists, received \$5,000 scholarships.

Stephen Kelly of Miami Lakes Middle School won the middle school division and a \$5,000 scholarship. Ladarrius Blackman received a \$2,500 scholarship for finishing second.