

Miami Big Brothers Big Sisters program has big effect on the lives of the 'littles'

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By: Marcus Lim

When Karla Moran was a freshman at Hialeah-Miami Lakes High School in 2013, she was shy and communicated very little. A chance pairing through the Big Brothers Big Sisters of Miami's program "School to Work" placed her as a "little" to May-Ling Martinez, her "big," her mentor for three years. Now, Moran is confident, open-minded and landed her first job.

The program pairs high school students with established, working professionals to give them a taste of what the working world is like. Along the way, the big helps their little with résumés and interview preparation, and potentially the two form a close relationship like Moran and Martinez did.



Martinez, a senior vice president at Perry Ellis International, said she “gained a daughter” by being Moran’s big, attending her high school graduation. Moran is now attending Barry University majoring in biology.

“This program helped us get closer, and we still continued a relationship when the program ended,” Martinez said. “Going to her high school graduation was very emotional ... and I look forward to being part of her college education.”

Martinez also helped Moran get noticed by Perry Ellis International, where Moran now works part time at Dolphin Mall as a sales associate.

On Wednesday, Perry Ellis International is hosting an internal “job fair” for its BBBS School to Work program participants, giving other high school students the same chance that Moran had: a career opportunity within the company. And in a reversal of roles, Moran will be the one interviewing applicants and sharing her experiences.

“I think it’s an amazing opportunity to work and grow in this environment; you have to understand that not everyone is the same ... [and] don’t like being approached the same way, and you talk to them in different ways,” Moran said. “It’s a great experience, but as a sales associate, you help people feel better about themselves. There’s nothing better than having someone saying that you helped them. It’s a rewarding job, and I love what I do.”

There have been similar stories of bigs helping littles succeed once they graduate from high school, which Gale Nelson, president of BBBS Miami, hoped for when it launched the program in 2006.

“The best investment literally is in our children — they will pay us back for years to come,” Nelson said. “Everyone can relate to having a special friend, a hero, a personal counsel in our life. ... We deliver immeasurable results that a community needs, a community can see and a community should invest in.”

When Nelson helped design the program, he wanted to eliminate two problems. The first was how most BBBS volunteers wanted their littles to be younger children, leaving high school students not being picked. The other issue was that they didn’t have many volunteers from the corporate world, the main reason being that they did not have much time. The school-to-work program addresses both problems, resulting in more than 1,100 high school

students participating and more than 60 corporate brands partnered with BBBS.

The time together is simply structured. Once a month from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., there's transportation from the little's school to their big's workplace, breakfast together, life skill training such as helping with interview techniques and portfolio builders, and serving as a role model. This takes place during regular school and working hours.

"Even if we meet only once a month, it's been a big change to the program. Trust me, it is well worth it," Martinez said of her time with Moran. "Even for mentors, as well, you take on the challenge and try to figure out what the weaknesses are, what the strengths are, and bring the best out of them."

According to Nelson, the program has helped increase the high school graduation rate, and 95 percent of littles who graduate plan to go to college.

"The responsibility of mentors is helping children and I can't thank the leadership of all the companies," Nelson said. "It's the gift that keeps on giving. They are preparing tomorrow's workforce."