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Lawyer Andrew Black (left) and LaMonte Fields, 17, have been paired as brothers in Big Brothers/Big Sisters for eight years.
photo by Artists for Humanity

Little Brothers, Sisters:

LOOKING FOR BIG FRIENDS

By Carla Gualdr n T.i.P. Senior Editor and Sarah Blanchette T.i.P. Senior Writer

A soft buzz greeted customers inside J.P. Licks on Centre Street in Jamaica Plain. The aroma of fresh coffee thickened the air as customers waited to be served. Into this scene walked 17-year-old LaMonte Fields of Boston. He smiled as he pulled down his fitted baseball cap. Seconds later, a man dressed in a suit and tie walked over and stood next to Fields. At a quick glance no one would guess these two are brothers. Well, not biological brothers, but they are brothers through the Big Brothers Big Sisters of Massachusetts Bay.

Fields and his big brother, Andrew Black, a lawyer, have been paired for nearly eight years. Black thinks back on why he joined the program. "It sounded like a good program. I thought it would be a fun experience, and I thought we would be able to have a good time," he says. Fields, who comes from a single-parent family, is the oldest sibling. "In the beginning I never knew what our relationship was going to be like. I never had a big brother. Now I'm really comfortable, maybe too comfortable," he says.

The pair enjoy playing sports and attending athletic games together, although their relationship isn't all games. Black has also helped Fields with his school work and prepared him for the SATs. This brotherly bond has benefited both. "He's certainly taught me what's going on in today's high schools," says Black. After trying to find the right words, Fields says, "I feel like I've grown a lot with Andrew. I've gained a lot from him and I really love being his little brother."

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America has origins as far back as 1904. Ernest Coulter, who was working in a New York City court, began noticing a pattern of young boys coming through the courtroom. Coulter realized that caring adult role models could have a positive, long lasting effect on these troubled boys. Through funding and organization, Coulter recruited volunteers to mentor young boys.

Elsewhere in New York, a group of women known as the Ladies of

Charity began volunteering their time to help distressed girls. This group became known as the Catholic Big Sisters. In 1977, these two organizations joined forces and established Big Brothers Big Sisters of America. The organization's mission is to "help children reach their potential through professionally supported, one-to-one relationships with mentors that have a measurable impact on youth." Since then, the program has helped youth cope with family issues, do better on schoolwork, and face pressures such as whether or not to use alcohol or drugs.

Former little brother Chris LaFortune, 18, of Boston, has seen incredible success during his six years in the program. LaFortune's mother suggested he join the program when he was 12 after she noticed he needed a stronger male influence in his life. LaFortune and his big brother Larry enjoyed everyday activities, from going to the movies to running errands. "We would even pay our bills together," says LaFortune, who is now a freshman at Harvard University and credits some of his success to his experience in Big Brothers.

"The view on the world that I have would be significantly different without Larry," says LaFortune. When asked if he would ever consider being a big brother, he said he would absolutely consider it. "I would love to help others the same way that I was helped."

Ruselini Castro, 17, of Jamaica Plain, was also influenced by her mother to join the program. Although Castro is an older sister herself, she has benefited from having a big sister.

"We had this chemistry which was unbelievable. She was interested, which played a big part. She wanted to help me and to be a mentor to me. She never had a younger sibling to look down on, she was the youngest one, so she wanted to be an older sibling to somebody else," Castro says about her big sister, Delecia Sampson, who won the "Big of the Year" award in 2007 for her outstanding service to the program.

Castro and Sampson have been paired for three years. "She's taught me so much, like little tiny things, like going to a restaurant and knowing how to read a menu and order," says Castro. "I've learned how to stand up for myself because when I was younger I used to have problems in school and she would encourage me to stand up for myself. She's been like a big sister but sometimes she's even been like a parent to me."

Monica Boland, now 20, started in the program when she was 19, during her sophomore year at Emerson College. Her little sister, who was in the fifth grade, was going through a difficult time at home. Her parents were going through a long divorce. "We would just talk about things she wouldn't talk to her parents about and was embarrassed to talk to her friends about," says Boland. Together, Boland and her little sister worked on homework and creative projects.

According to the Big Brothers Big Sisters website, studies show the long lasting impact of the program. After spending 18 months with their Big Brother/Sister the "littles" are 46 percent less likely to begin using illegal drugs, 52 percent less likely to skip school, and a majority are more confident of their performance on school work. "Overall, I believe that it is a really amazing program. I think that we both benefited a lot," Boland says of her experience.

After little brothers or sisters turn 18, they no longer have to continue their relationship with their big. But, as Fields says, "he can stop being my big brother but I don't know how you can stop being big brothers with someone you've been together with for eight years."

If you are interested in becoming a mentor to a younger child, and you are at least 18 years old, you can apply online or by telephone. An application is available at www.bbbs.org, or you can call 888-412-BIGS for more information. Volunteers are required to have a background check, provide various references, and give an in-person interview. Also, you or someone you know between the ages of 6 to 18 could benefit from this program by being mentored. It is a fun way to learn new things and stay on track in school and many other aspects of life. "You can never start at this program early enough," LaFortune says.