

DAILY NEWS

THE PEOPLE PAPER

THE INVISIBLE MEN



DAVID MAIALETTI/Daily News

Juan Caban, 14, and his Big Brother, Rev. Ruben Ortiz, at the Iglesia del Barrio.

A mentor makes a difference

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THERE ARE the staggering statistics: About 2.4 million children in the United States have a parent in jail.

Then comes the hammer: Without help from a caring, involved adult, up to 70 percent of those children could

easily follow their mother's or father's path and wind up in jail.

There are statistics, but then there are stories, too. Stories like that of Rev. Ruben Ortiz, the 38-year-old pastor of the Iglesia del Barrio church in Kensington, and 14-year-old Juan Caban.

Ortiz, a married father of three, has been teamed with Juan, whose father hasn't been around since he was 4 and

whose mother died three years ago. Ortiz has been Juan's mentor through the Amachi Big Brother, Big Sisters program for the last five years.

Juan lives right across the street from Ortiz's church, at Cambria and A streets, in a neighborhood still on edge after the slaying of 15-year-old Omar Rodriguez last Sunday morning.

Any of 20,000 similar stories from

across the country could be told when the Amachi Big Brothers, Big Sisters celebrates its fifth anniversary in a conference called "Breaking the Cycle of Incarceration" that kicks off today in Center City.

The 20,000 stories represent the number of children of jailed parents who have been matched with a Big Brother or Big Sister since the program began in Philadelphia five years ago.

"Amachi" is a West African word meaning "who knows but what God has brought us through this child."

It was founded when four people came together over an idea conceived by John DiIulio, a University of Pennsylvania professor of politics, religion and civil society, who served briefly as President Bush's first director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

DiIulio soon teamed up with Judy Vredenburg, president and CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters of America; Rev. W. Wilson Goode, the former Philadelphia mayor who brought the first congregations on board to provide

mentors; and Gary Walker, president of Public/Private Ventures, a nonprofit group that had completed research on how intervention through ways such as mentoring could keep "high-risk" children from following a parent into jail.

"We want to use this fifth anniversary to get out the fact that we have an effective program, a way to deliver kids from a cycle of violence and incarceration," Vredenburg said.

"We know the program works," she said. "We have a method of recruiting volunteers, but we seriously need financial partners."

For his part, Rev. Goode said his work with Amachi "is without question the most significant thing I've done in my professional life — and that includes being mayor of Philadelphia."

Goode, in his meetings with church leaders, asks them to "go outside the walls of the church" to get involved with children from their neighborhoods.

He has told the story of a grandfather, father and grandson, who all met each other for the first time in jail.

"The amazing thing about that is that it's not unique," Goode said.

The conference, which about 300 people are expected to attend, starts early today at the Loews Philadelphia Hotel at 12th and Market streets. But the main opening session is at 1:15 p.m. at Arch Street United Methodist Church, near City Hall.

In the five years he has been a Big Brother to Juan, Ortiz said, he

has seen a boy who has become more open and more trusting.

There was a time when Juan "was not expressive about what he felt about anything," Ortiz said. "Anytime he'd talk about something that bothered him, he'd be really sad."

Juan has also begun to blossom as an artist. A painting of Juan's drew the largest price at an auction to raise money for the church.

Ortiz said he didn't want to try to be a pseudo-parent to Juan, but just someone he feels he can talk to about anything.

He noted that Juan lives in a house full of women — his grandmother, who has been raising him since his mother died, a couple of aunts and a younger sister.

So, some weekends, rather than base their friendship on entertainment, Ortiz sometimes just brings Juan along if he has to buy auto parts or go to a supermarket.

"Not only does he love it; these were things that I took for granted, but they were new to him. I found by including him in the things I was already doing, rather than try to create something new, that that built the relationship.

"There are times he'd just say, 'Hey Rube, I want to talk to you,' and it could be about a fight in school or the fact that he was mad at his grandmother for punishing him about something."

And while the program seeks out mentors connected to a church or other place of worship, Ortiz says his relationship with Juan isn't based on trying to convince him to come to church every Sunday.

"My role is to build a friendship. If that leads to his coming to my house once in a while to have a meal with my family, or coming over to the church, that's OK." ★

Looking for success

The Daily News is running a series of stories about what happens to young men — in our city, often young black men — once they leave school or stop working.

The problem is serious nationwide — and has caught the attention of many.

But we also know this city is filled with individuals and groups committed to saving these young men. Groups such as Amachi, which works with the children of prisoners to break the cycle of incarceration that runs through too many families.

We want to write about more success stories like these. Tell us what's working in your neighborhood by e-mailing feedback@phillynews.com. Please write "Invisible Men" in the subject line.

To read all our past stories, visit <http://go.philly.com/invisiblemen>



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