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The four sons of Big Brother Craig Lovett

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Pernell Francis thought he was doing fine without a Big Brother.

"It would be good for you," suggested Diana Bavusa, who'd raised the boy as her son in a rowhouse filled with girls. Now throat cancer kept her from leaving the house.

To Pernell, who was seven at the time, "good for you" brought to mind vegetables, like broccoli, only worse. Onions, maybe.

He was to meet the man at the old Big Brothers' office on Snyder Avenue in South Philadelphia, talk for a while, see if they clicked. Pernell was wearing his karate robe and pants.

In walks this old, bald guy with a fringe of snow-white hair and a bit of a paunch. Seeing Pernell in his uniform, the man set his feet, clenched his fists and screamed "Hi-YA!"

Ice broken, they went to a room to talk. Craig Lovett, 69, remembers the conversation starting like this:

Pernell: "You got to know something about me. I'm half-white, half-black, and I'm 10 percent Indian."

Craig: "To me, that makes you 110 percent all-American, pal."

The two were feasting on this four-year-old story a few nights ago at Tony Luke's on Oregon Avenue, which Pernell and Craig often hit for their weekly dinners. Pernell had invited me, through an e-mail that read:

"I'm kinda tired of those stories I see on TV about so much killing in Philadelphia. I would like you to

write a story about my mentor, my Big Brother, Craig."

Craig had warned me about Pernell. "For a skinny little kid, his diet is atrocious," he'd said. As advertised, Pernell was washing down a massive starter of buffalo shrimp with a Coke. A chicken parm sandwich was next.

Not any brother

Turns out Craig isn't just any Big Brother. In March he was named Big Brother of the Year for Pennsylvania (an even more impressive accomplishment, seeing that he's from New Jersey). He's in the running for the national award.

Only he didn't mention any of this - Pernell did.

What Craig did was brag on Pernell.

"He's a black belt, first degree, in karate. He's a sneaky goal scorer in soccer. He can breakdance. He had a role as an extra on *Law & Order*. And he was in *The Nutcracker* at the Kimmel Center this year. Tell him!"

"I was a small mouse," Pernell said, elbow to elbow with Craig. He's freckled with tight black curls that drip like squid-ink fusilli from his forehead. "There were big mice, too. Someone from the Rock School came to my school, and there was a trout."

Craig went to the show, of course.

For Craig, being a Big Brother has meant 35 years of being there for four Little Brothers - being there for the big events, like plays and playoffs and graduations. Being there for the small stuff, like weekly dinners with Pernell - even if it's just takeout pizza.

In 1972 Craig responded to a radio

ad for men who wanted to spend regular time with needy boys, after realizing that for him, being a borough councilman in Oaklyn, N.J., "wasn't really a way to serve humanity."

"It's been 90 percent good," he says. "There are ups and downs like everything else in life."

Wake-up call

A down was the night one of his Little Brothers called at 3 a.m., having broken up with his girlfriend. He needed a place to stay. So Craig got out of bed, drove a half-hour to meet the young man outside his house. A car pulled up - the girlfriend - and Craig's distraught pal climbed in and drove off, leaving him standing in the middle of the street. But the ups? Without Pernell, he probably wouldn't be current on Harry Potter or have seen every *Star Wars* episode. Pernell's tried to teach him to play a video game named Jaws, with much amusement and little success.

Pernell and his family - his mother had him at 13, so Bavusa has raised him - have filled a void left three years ago by the death of Craig's wife.

"I've gotten an extended family out of this," Craig said. "Not only with the kids, but with the family. You never lose track of them when they grow up. They stick with you like mud. I've got four sons I'd never have had. I love them, and I think they love me."

Pernell looked at him and asked softly, "You think?"