



Elmer Smith | Second chances for boy & missing man



GINA GAYLE/Daily News
Arthur J. "Max" Wells III gives haircut, and a chance, to Aaquil Madison.

AAQUIL MADISON'S father was murdered before he really got to know him. Max the barber knows how those missing-man stories usually end.

Max, whose birth name is Arthur J. Wells III, was the missing man when his sons were Aaquil's age, which is 12. Both of his sons are now in jail.

Max and his adult sons are friends today. But they will never know how different their lives would have been if he had just been there for them.

What Max does know is that a man who stays on the sidelines while his sons are growing up without him is not an innocent bystander.

That's never far from his mind. It was part of what was stirring his spirit that day a year or so ago when his pastor, Rev. Willie Richardson, challenged the men of Christian Stronghold Baptist Church to get involved in the life of a boy.

Almost before he knew it, Max was signing up for the Amachi program, a special project of Big Brothers Big Sisters.

That's how Aaquil and Max ended up giving each other a second chance. For Max, it's a chance to give back what he got from positive men in his life and what he failed to share with his sons until they were already men.

For Aaquil, it's a chance to develop a relationship with the kind of man his mother hopes he'll become.

"He needs to know that being a man is not getting up and rolling a blunt and standing on the corner," his mother, Waddah Madison, told me.

"Emotionally, he's remarkably stable considering what he's been through. I've seen too much violence. His father was murdered when he was seven. My uncle was murdered and countless other young black men I knew of.

"I'm not trying to lose him to the streets or to jail. This gives him a positive male role model. He's getting to see that Max works hard every day."

Every day - and some nights - at Maxamillion's Gentlemen's Quarters, a men's grooming station at 20th and Chestnut streets. He's there 50 hours a week giving haircuts, mustache trims, facials and the occasional lecture.

"I challenge men all the time to get involved," Max told me recently. "We can't lose another generation.

"When my sons were young, I was ripping and running the streets. I wasn't in their lives. I regret that.

"I've had to go back and ask them to forgive me. And when I got saved, I asked God to forgive me.

"I had the advantage of men in my life," Max said. "My mother took me out of parochial school and put me in Alexander Wilson public school because it had a male principal.

"The principal, Mr. Holiday, and a teacher named Mr. Nichols gave me a chance to see black men who were in authority.

"Now I'm blessed to have a relationship with my sons. They're both about to get out and now I have Aaquil. It's a privilege to be in his life."

I asked Aaquil if he was surprised to hear that.

"No, not at all" he said. "He has a good attitude. He treats me good. That's the main thing. I like the way he treats me.

"We go to the movies. He took me to the aquarium. I even met his father."

Aaquil's an articulate seventh grader at Young Scholars Charter school. He likes art and has a little brother who is six and already looks up to him.

"I think I'd like to be a Big Brother when I get older," he said.

More than a third of the "bigs," as men like Max are called, had been "littles" like Aaquil before they grew up and switched roles.

But Big Brothers Big Sisters Southeastern Pennsylvania is in desperate need of mentors, especially for minority boys. Any man who has ever been a boy is eligible.

If you've got an interest and can spare a few hours a month, call them at 215-790-9200.