



## Elmer Smith | Need is enormous, wait is long for men to be Big Brothers

Nasheed Parker, 13, and his Big Brother, Nathaniel Tillman. A thousand other boys are not so lucky.



JOSEPH KACZMAREK / Daily News

CHARISSE MELVIN had been on hold for four years by the time Nathaniel Tillman answered her call.

She was one of the lucky ones. Most mothers who call Big Brothers Big Sisters looking for a man to mentor their sons get nothing but a busy signal.

They are busy trying to whittle down a waiting list of more than 1,000 boys in this region alone who are looking for male mentors. Recruiters have been showing up at frat houses, fire stations and police roll calls, as well as at churches, social-service organizations and anywhere else where men gather.

The organization needs more than a few good men to meet a demand that far exceeds supply. How far is a mystery because it has cut off the waiting list for boys 13 and older.

"We don't want to disappoint kids," said Louise Phillips, a partnership-development specialist for Big Brothers Big Sisters.

"If you put them on a waiting list, we may not get to them until they're too old for the program."

Old enough to be mentors themselves. In fact, one mother lode of prospective mentors is former "littles," as they call them, who later become "bigs."

Charisse Melvin's son Nasheed Parker was 9 when she decided she needed to get a man in his life.

"Every boy needs a man to look up to," she told me. "I can be a good mom but I can't give him that."

"There's just not a lot of good men out there."

So few, in fact, that the traditional sources have dried up. She has been pushing hard at police stations, where the call for Big Brothers Big Sisters has become part of daily roll-call.

"We figured that would be good," Phillips said, "because that's a heavily male occupation."

"We got about 10 volunteers from police stations so far. But guess what - most of them were women."

In fairness to men in the Police Department, their PAL programs draw scores of male volunteers, which may account for why so few have come forward for Big Brothers Big Sisters.

Local churches have been the most reliable source of potential mentors. Nathaniel Tillman signed up after the Rev. Alyn Waller, pastor of Enon Tabernacle Baptist Church, invited Louise Phillips to speak.

"I remember Pastor Waller saying one time that if every one of us did just a little something, we would make a difference," Tillman said.

How much difference he will be able to make in the life of Nasheed Parker remains to be seen. For now, it's all about enjoying their time together.

"I was just looking to spend a little time with a young man," said Tillman, 59. "It's been fun for me. We went to a Sixers game and went out to breakfast together, went to a movie. We just get together. I'm hoping to take him skiing

and expose him to some things he hasn't had a chance to see yet."

Nasheed, 13, a seventh-grader at Hill Freedman Middle School, had no idea how long he had been on the waiting list when Tillman showed up. For him, the timing couldn't have been better.

"It's been good," Nasheed said of his time with Tillman. "I think we're going bowling this weekend. Mostly, we talk about sports. He's easy to talk to."

Sometimes that's as good as it gets and that's good enough. As the relationship grows, though, a Big Brother can become a significant resource for a boy.

"My daughter has a Big Sister that she has been matched with for a couple of years," Charisse Melvin said. "Shydae [her daughter] loves her."

"There are just things sometimes that a girl doesn't want to discuss with her mother that she may tell her big sister. I'm thankful for that."

It could work out that way for Nasheed and his new Big Brother.

But even if they just get to hang out together from time to time, it was worth holding the line for.

There are 1,000 boys holding the line for Big Brothers in this region right now. If you're man enough to answer that call, you can reach one by calling 215-790-9200.

You don't have to be a professional; you don't have to have any money or expertise. Even men who have had a slight brush with the law may be eligible.