



Elmer Smith | Is there a mentor in your mirror? At-risk kids hope so

MARLENE OLSHAN reads the daily dispatches from the war zone like a field commander.

More than 300 lives have been lost so far this year in an inexplicable wave of violence that often turns whole sections of the city into a free-fire zone.

What drives Olshan, who is CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southeastern Pennsylvania, is the belief that it will be worse if she can't deploy more of her forces in the area of greatest need.

"So many of the children we serve right now are in the same ZIP codes where the murder rate is rising," Olshan said. "We need to save these kids."

They know what works. They have a proven strategy of matching men and women with at-risk boys and girls in one-on-one mentoring relationships.

They can rattle off the statistics: Children in these matches are 46 percent less likely to use illegal drugs, 27 percent less likely to begin using alcohol, 52 percent less likely to miss school.

They're also a lot less likely to die in the mindless carnage that claims so many.

But the need is outpacing the resources at an alarming rate. There are 100,000 at-risk children in the region, 20,000 of them with at least one parent in jail.

And there just aren't enough mentors for them.

"If a single mom wants to sign her son up for a match right now, we can't even take her name," Olshan said.

"Our waiting list is 70 percent boys and half of them are African-American. I got a heart-wrenching letter today from a woman whose son has been on the waiting list for three years. We've got a lot of work to do.

"We have 3,000 matches made in the area and we'd like to get up to 5,000."

And this is why she needs you.

She needs you to help save these kids.

It doesn't involve much time or heavy work. You don't have to be a professional.

"We're looking for plumbers and blue-collar workers, average Joes. If they can't do one-to-one mentoring, we have a school-based program where we ask for an hour a week maybe two or three times a month.

"They can come in at lunch time. We all have to eat. Why not eat with a kid?"

It's a sermon she and her cadre deliver every time someone slows down long enough to hear it. They're out to get you and they make no bones about it.

They're showing up in area churches, hanging around outside corporate board rooms and partnering with any individual or organization they can recruit.

They've got us in it. The Daily News is partnering with Big Brothers Big Sisters in this recruiting effort aimed at our readers as much as ourselves.

Their best promotional tool is the testimony of the "bigs" and "littles" as they call them. You could fill a large stadium with people in this region who say Big Brothers Big Sisters changed their lives.



Brandon Bowers didn't need to hear the sermon. As a former little brother who has become a big brother, he could preach it.

"I grew up in public housing in Massachusetts," he told me. "I was exposed to a lot of paths that would have led me to jail or death in my neighborhood.

"But, for some reason, I had a determination to excel. I just wanted to do well in school.

"My mother signed me up for Big Brothers at this recreation center where I used to go. She saw I was looking for some guidance."

His big brother was a college student in his area named Jack. They went camping, did sports together. He visited with Jack on campus.

Eventually, Jack graduated and literally moved on with his life.

But not before he planted a seed that germinated a year ago in Southeastern Pennsylvania, when Brandon became a big brother to Alex Molina, then 8.

"I saw a lot of myself in him," Bowers said. "His mom was a single parent like mine, he's got a ton of charisma. We just clicked.

"We've been paired for a year and a half now and we're getting to the point where he's beginning to trust me enough to turn to me for advice."

"He's smart," Alex said of his big brother. "If I can't do something, he will help me. I like being with him."

Alex's mother, Jenny Molina, said it's the second perfect match her son has had with a big brother. Molina, a working mom and part-time student, also has a big sister for her daughter.

"They do a good job of making the matches," she said. "If they say it's a good match, I believe it."

The matches are skillfully supported by staffers who make sure each mentor has what he or she needs to be a "big."

"We do extensive background checks, child abuse clearances and in some of our programs even an in-home assessment," Olshan said.

But you don't have to be perfect to qualify. Even potential mentors who have had a brush with the law may qualify.

The important thing is finding people who will try.

"We have a history," Olshan said. "We can make a difference. "We just need enough bodies and bucks to do the job."