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NEWS

Big Brothers Big Sisters extends mentoring into the college years



"Big Brother" Miguel Vasquez and his "Little Brother" Anthony, 17, at Miguel's office in Costa Mesa, on Wednesday, April 19, 2017. They've been a match since 2009 and will continue to be after Anthony graduates high school and turns 18 thanks to a new program called Destination Future which extends Big Brothers Big Sisters mentoring to age 25. (Photo by Kevin Sullivan, Orange County Register/SCNG)

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Miguel Vasquez is a busy man — a commercial real estate consultant and father of a 3-year-old — but has managed to devote time to mentor a teenage boy through Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County and the Inland Empire.

When Vasquez, 42, and Anthony, his “Little Brother,” were matched in 2009, Anthony was 10. Seven years later, Anthony is about to graduate high school, with the aim of attending community college — a plan that Vasquez has encouraged. Yet when it comes to navigating today’s complex world of higher education, both mentor and mentee admit they could use some help.

To that end, they’ll be assisted by the local Big Brothers Big Sisters affiliate through a novel initiative, the first of its kind for the national organization.

With \$1 million in grant money, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County and the Inland Empire will extend its Destination Future initiative to provide continued guidance to youth after they turn 18, when they traditionally age out of the mentoring program and formal services stop.

Now through the age of 25, college-bound “littles” and those who head straight to the workforce, join the military or seek vocational training, can benefit from the help of two navigators — one for college and another for careers — that Big Brothers Big Sisters is bringing on board.

The data was telling Big Brothers Big Sisters that more was needed to help the youth in their program — who come from families of modest means typically headed by single mothers — to not only be the first in their families to go on to college, but get their degree or certificate and land jobs that offer a living wage.

Or, if college won’t be in their future, get the kind of training necessary to advance beyond low-wage employment in a challenging workforce.

“We were doing a lot but it wasn’t really completing the job,” said Melissa Beck, chief executive officer at Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County and the Inland Empire.

The organization launched Destination Future in 2013 with the goal of increasing the high school graduation rate and college matriculation. So far, it’s been a success.

State and federal data from 2014, the most recent figure available for Big Brothers Big Sisters to do a comparison, show a 76 percent high school completion rate for low-income students in California. At Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County and the Inland Empire, 99 percent of the youth served are earning a high school diploma.

What Beck refers to as “Destination Future 1.0” offers activities that include exposing participants to careers in the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and math), SAT and ACT test preparation, college campus visits, resume writing, job interviews and career days with local employers.

But even though young people in Big Brothers Big Sisters were graduating high school, with about 90 percent going on to college, there was concern about them finishing. Others who entered the workforce weren’t advancing toward self-sufficiency.

“We were seeing where our kids were not staying in jobs longer than six months or were continuing in low-wage jobs,” Beck said.

A good 60 percent of the Big Brothers Big Sisters youth are the first in their families to graduate high school. In Orange County, they come from households earning less than \$30,000 a year; in

the Inland Empire, family income is less than \$18,000. The local organization is serving about 3,700 children and teens this year.

Nationwide, only 9 percent of students from low-income households finish college, compared to 77 percent from middle- and high-income families, Beck said. The local Big Brothers Big Sisters chapter, approaching its 60th year, is being looked at as a trailblazer by others around the country who hope to improve that statistic for the youth they serve.

“The national office and affiliates are watching to see how it goes,” Beck said. “We feel it could be replicated around the country.”

One Saturday last month, more than half of the nearly 70 mentees who will graduate high school this year attended a kickoff event in Santa Ana to learn about the next phase of Destination Future. Many came with their mentors, others with a parent. They were introduced to Stephanie Arroyo, the newly hired education coordinator for Destination Future.

Arroyo briefly shared her own experience as a graduate of Loara High in Anaheim who wasn't sure she was much of a scholar until she started taking classes at Fullerton College.

“It changed my life,” said Arroyo, who went on to earn a sociology degree at UC Berkeley and then a master's in social work at USC.

She gave the college-bound students three summer tasks: get their financial aid in place and know how it will be disbursed; visit and learn their way around their future school; attend an on-campus summer bridge program for the transition.

Before letting them leave for a catered lunch and portrait-taking with their mentors, Arroyo had the students sign up for a one-on-one session with her before a planned July 29 “Laptop Luau” when the Big Brothers Big Sisters graduating class will be celebrated and receive free laptop computers.

They also filled out a survey to indicate the top three Destination Future services or workshops that would interest them the most.

Jocelyn, a high school junior from Riverside who is graduating early and will attend Riverside Community College, said she had trouble deciding on three areas of focus. She eventually settled on career exploration, financial aid and academic honors. Like Anthony, Jocelyn's last name isn't being published to protect her identity.

“I told her, this is a lesson for college, prioritizing your life,” said her mentor, Bonnie Gaffney, a middle school physical education teacher in Moreno Valley and a first lieutenant in the California Air National Guard.

The two marked their second year as a match last week. Jocelyn, 17, has been in the Big Brothers Big Sisters program since she was 10; Gaffney is her third Big Sister mentor. Jocelyn comes from a family of seven children; her mom is a homemaker and her dad has a landscaping business. The outgoing Gaffney, she said, really helped her come out of her shell and work through a period of depression.

“I feel like we’re at this end goal,” Gaffney, 33, said to Jocelyn about her upcoming graduation from Alvord Continuation High. “Now we’re going to get you to 25.”

Although Jocelyn has the example of older siblings at college — one sister graduated Cal State Fullerton and another, along with a brother, attends Riverside Community College — she sees value in having Big Brothers Big Sisters continue providing services for her and other mentees into their mid-20s.

Even if you don’t go to college, Jocelyn said, life after high school can be rocky: “You need a little help with all the changes. It will help depending on what activities they do and what they will offer.”

For the high school graduates headed directly into the workforce, a career navigator will be hired to work closely with local companies in identifying employment opportunities that can include apprenticeships leading to good-paying jobs in such skill-based fields as automotive, bottling, manufacturing, plumbing, and air conditioning.

The outreach will build on existing relationships with businesses that already provide site visits, workshops and career days for Destination Future. Employers need help, too, in developing good job candidates, Beck said.

“We’re hearing from them that they don’t have enough people for the positions they have or they can’t find kids trained properly for the workforce,” she said. “Our partners recognize this is a person who has a built-in support system already there.”

One big backer is EMCOR Services Mesa Energy Systems, a licensed commercial HVAC contractor based in Irvine that has provided both financial and career-readiness support. This summer, EMCOR will offer internships that could lead to an apprenticeship.

“In a time where a lot of young people are having difficulty landing their first jobs and finding careers, the HVAC trade is ripe with opportunities,” said David Geith, director of service for EMCOR’s Irvine branch, who recently spoke at a Destination Future career day. “Any chance we have to help young people understand that there are great post-secondary alternatives out there in the HVAC trades, we take it.”

While Big Brothers Big Sisters mentor Vasquez has spoken often about college to Anthony, the same as his parents did with him, he admits to limited knowledge about the resources Anthony will need for post-secondary success. Anthony lives in Costa Mesa with his mother, a native of Ecuador who raised her three children on her own. His father is in Ecuador.

“Anthony’s family didn’t have those resources and as a mentor, I’m going, ‘I don’t have a teenage kid, what do you do, where do you go?’” said Vasquez, who grew up in Fountain Valley and Santa Ana and attended college in Boulder, Colo.

Finances have always been a challenge for Anthony’s family. His mom is a U.S. citizen but has limited English skills. She works as an in-home health care provider, Vasquez said. Last summer, Vasquez pushed Anthony to work at the Orange County Fair, as he did in his youth. Anthony sent him a selfie with his first paycheck.

Anthony said he hasn’t applied for any scholarships yet because “I’m not sure if I should or shouldn’t.” He’s also undecided about what career to pursue; he plans to take business classes at

Coastline Community College and has an interest in photography. He sings in his school choir, played on the soccer team, and is an avid skateboarder who earns new decks for his board from Vasquez by doing well in school.

Vasquez, Anthony said, is a big influence “on making the right decisions on what I should do and if I like something to pursue it.” His two older sisters, who dropped out of college to go to work, didn’t get that kind of help.

“They never really had someone to guide them to do things,” Anthony said. “I have Miguel, my mom, my sisters, the (Big Brothers Big Sisters) program itself.”