

Step Up Big Detroit Campaign Sharpens Big Brothers Big Sisters Focus on Social Justice, Equity

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Jeannine Gant remembers the phone call she got from a gentleman in Florida who told her his life was “going great” but that he was having a hard time pinpointing why that was.

Then he remembered.

“He said it was the day they put a Big Brother in his life,” said Gant, the CEO and President of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metropolitan Detroit. “He said it was the first time someone had really stopped to see him, to listen to him, to inspire and encourage him.

“He was in a happy place, and he felt like Big Brother made that difference for him,” she said.

It’s a difference Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metropolitan Detroit has been making since the 1970s (and even back long before that but without the “Metropolitan Detroit” moniker), and one for which the organization is seeking some help now.

Now, as the group begins to pivot to more of a focus on social and racial injustice, officials are looking for some help, launching the Step Up Big Detroit campaign to try to attract more corporate and individual partners.

Social justice has always been part of the mission, Gant points out, but following the deaths of George Floyd and Breona Taylor last year, it’s becoming more of a focal point.

Step Up Big Detroit, Gant said, is an opportunity to invite the community to support Big Brothers Big Sisters as “we reframe our work with the lens of justice, diversity, equity and inclusion.”

“That’s the lens we’re going to start using as we think about supporting the young people in our community,” Gant said. “The majority of youth supported by Big Brothers Big Sisters are youth of color and I think when we serve youth of color we need to take into account issues of justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. That’s what this is really all about.”

Step Up Big Detroit is a way for the community to engage with Big Brothers Big Sisters in ways more tactile than simply writing a check (although, Gant said, those are still obviously welcome).

“We’re saying to our corporate partners, ‘join us as allies in this work,’” Gant said. “That’s moving beyond just a partnership, it’s moving beyond writing a check. It really is about building a relationship, really stepping into the space and saying, ‘As a company we are committed to justice, equity, diversity and inclusion.’”

Gant believes unjust systems have a harder impact on young people because, she says, it “impacts their future, their perspective of themselves, what’s available to them in the future.”

“That’s why we’re asking our partners to step into this space with us, not just now, but for future generations,” she said. “We want them to engage with us, engage their employees, we want their employees to ... step up and become Big Brothers and Big Sisters, but also to become allies.”

They need the allies. Big Brothers Big Sisters mentors some 750 children (although the numbers have dropped during COVID) between 7 and 17 years of age every year. It costs roughly \$1,600 per child (if you do the math, that’s some \$1.2 million).

As the organization turns its attention to a heavier bent on social and racial injustice, it’s worth noting that 82% of the kids the group serves identify as children of color.

“Our mission is really to place a well-trained, caring adult in the life of a young person, to be a mentor,” Gant said. “We know mentoring works to change the trajectory of young people. It helps to reduce their risky behavior, it helps to improve their academic success, it helps them build better relationships.”

The Step Up Big Detroit campaign is already attracting new partners, and garnering support from long-time supporters, as well. Auto Club Group (AAA) began supporting Big Brothers Big Sisters back in 2001, and they’ve joined on as a multi-year sponsor of Step Up Big Detroit.

In addition to AAA’s \$75,000 financial commitment, the company’s employees have also acted as mentors for a number of years.

Keith Mobley, AAA’s assistant vice president for Corporate Social Responsibility, said he’s guided by a quote from Maya Angelou: “When you learn, teach, and when you get, give.”

“Everyone, and I do mean everyone ... has an opportunity to lean in and mentor the youth in our neighborhoods on some level,” Mobley said. “We’re at a unique crossroad with education in this country, and in order to prepare students to thrive for the long term and become successful leaders, it requires all of us to be involved to ensure equal access to information and resources that are the fundamental requirements for a successful future.

“Rehearsal is over!” Mobley added. “We know where the opportunities lie and we know what to do! Our response to the gaps in education and the youth in our communities today will determine who become our leaders tomorrow.”

That’s the kind of engagement Gant said Big Brothers Big Sisters is looking for, work that goes beyond corporate walls and extends actually out into the community.

Many — maybe most — companies are making an effort to develop stronger diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs. But Gant is encouraging potential corporate partners to do more than check that box. She wants them to stand up and lean into the work.

“When I say ‘beyond corporate walls,’ you’re not just thinking about the changes you can make inside the corporate walls, but how can you make a change in the community?” she said. “You make that change by getting involved, by supporting young people. DEI work is really ‘heart work’ if you really want to affect change that is sustainable.

“So we’re saying to our corporate partners, ‘Do your heart work with Big Brothers Big Sisters,’” she added. “You can’t help but be touched when you see the lives of young people who are impacted by systemic racism and social injustice and not being included and not feeling like they belong. You can’t help but be touched by that.

“We’re offering corporations an opportunity to not only talk the talk, but really walk the walk, to take their DEI commitment beyond corporate walls and into the community.”

Royal Oak-based law firm Howard & Howard is new to the campaign. Incoming President Jon Kreucher, who takes his new position Jan. 1, noted it’s the firm’s first experience partnering with Big Brothers Big Sisters, and praised Gant as a “thoughtful and engaged dynamo.”

“Others who we’ve met at Big Brothers Big Sisters are also sincerely dedicated to the organization’s youth mentorship mission,” Kreucher said. “We feel privileged to be part of their campaign.”

And, while the Step Up Big Detroit campaign “is absolutely deserving in its own right,” Kreucher points out that it’s not the firm’s only involvement in the community.

For instance, he said, the firm 40 years ago created a Community Reinvestment Fund focused on “Make a Difference” gifts that provide necessary services, change lives or enhance communities.”

“It’s one of the things that sets us apart,” he said. “We have a ... responsibility to enhance lives and create opportunities for others. We’re not just starting to walk this path. Giving back is one of the things that gives us purpose, and a big part of what Howard & Howard is all about.”

While Howard & Howard is new to the party, it’s an effort that’s been going on at Comcast for years. The cable giant has been a partner with Big Brothers Big Sisters for nearly 20 years, dating back to a “Lunch Buddies” program in Detroit. In 2012, Comcast introduced the “Beyond School Walls” program at McIntyre Elementary School in Southfield which brought students to the Comcast facility to meet their “Bigs,” Comcast employees who acted as mentors.

As part of the Step Up Big Detroit campaign, Craig D'agostini, Comcast's vice president for external affairs, took part in an event to help create a safe space for youth and adults to explore the topic of social justice and equity.

The group toured a local art exhibit in Detroit highlighting the efforts of Rosa Parks.

"It was a tremendous backdrop to facilitate discussions about diversity, equity and inclusion," D'agostini said. "We all participated in an honest discussion about what (DEI) meant to each of us, which helped build understanding between diverse individuals about how they see the world based on each of our unique life experiences."

D'agostini pointed out Comcast's Community Impact Philosophy is to "support the communities where our customers and employees live, work and play." He said volunteerism is a big part of that philosophy, and that Big Brothers Big Sisters embodies both of those ideals.

"Big Brothers Big Sisters has a long and successful history of facilitating the growth and positive development of young people in these communities," he said. "Big Brothers Big Sisters values volunteers and they know how to work with volunteers to create a positive experience for the youth and for the volunteers themselves."

That's what Michael Thompson thinks. Thompson, a financial advisor who resides in Melvindale and calls Detroit home, has been a "Big" – the group's term for a mentor – for about five years.

The 14-year-old ninth-grader he's mentoring now is his second "Little" – what the group calls a youngster being mentored. And Thompson considers his Little almost like family.

"They tell me about birthdays, other family events ... They have a diverse family, I hang out with (siblings)," Thompson said. "It's the enjoyment of hanging out with them, watching them mature, meeting his other siblings, and watching the development."

His experience with Big Brothers Big Sisters is a far cry from his first dealings with mentorship programs. He was teaching back in the '90s at a school he said was an advocate for young African-American boys. The school started a mentoring program centered around the school.

But the program didn't do a good job, Thompson said, of keeping track of relevant information. The infrastructure, he said, simply wasn't there.

"What I found was a lot of mentoring groups started with a great idea, but the infrastructure was weak," he said. "Any time you work with kids or families, phone numbers change, addresses change, there's a lot of intricacies that occur ... but they couldn't keep all the connections it takes for a child to be developed."

Thompson said he's known Gant "for years" and when he found out about Big Brothers Big Sisters, he was eager to join what he felt was a successful organization."

"I realized they aren't going anywhere ... they're national, they stay engaged," Thompson said. "I was impressed with how they do their due diligence. It was just the infrastructure of the organization to make sure the relationship persists. It's not just a one- or two-time thing."

No, it's not. The national organization has been around since 1904, and this chapter has been working since the mid-1930s, according to Gant, who pointed out the organization took on the Metropolitan Detroit persona in 1974.

Mentors – all of them volunteers – engage the young people in activities like tutoring, a variety of workshops, they take them to ball games or museums or other activities that help engage the young.

Most of the children come to Big Brothers Big Sisters because parents are often concerned and need support for their youngster. Sometimes, Gant said, the referrals come from schools, where teachers have seen children who aren't doing as well as they could be.

"Parents will call and say, 'I need help with my young one,'" Gant said. "Teachers understand the power of mentoring."

An assessment is done, the organization goes out and talks to the family, determine the challenges the child is facing. Then a suitable mentor is found and paired with the child. Big Brothers Big Sisters asks for a time commitment of four hours a month for one year.

As long as the child is willing.

"Sometimes we do get parents who've told their kids, 'I want you to do this program,' but if the kid doesn't want to do it, we won't do it," Gant explained. "The relationship is between that young person and their mentor. They have to want to do it. It's important that they buy into it and that they see the value in it."

Now, as the group begins to sharpen its focus on social injustice, Gant points out that Big Brothers Big Sisters has "always been a social justice organization," something she says "most people don't know."

The group's aim, Gant said, has always been to provide equity for young people who "are marginalized" so they're able to "get a lift up so they can achieve success" in life.

"They've been put at a disadvantage for a variety of reasons," Gant said. "You may have a kid in foster care, they may have a crisis with a parent, they may be in low-performing schools. Those are all barriers that prevent young people from being successful."

“We try to help elevate young people above those barriers if we can, and one of the things we’re trying to do with Step Up Big Detroit is simply create awareness about the impact that systemic social injustice has on the lives of our children,” Gant said. “I don’t know who else is lifting up and amplifying the youth voice in that way – I’m sure there are others – but we have a brand that people know, that people trust.

“We want to use our brand to elevate and amplify the impact that injustice has on the lives of young people,” she added. “Hopefully that will help them understand we have to do better in terms of creating a society that is equitable and inclusive for everybody. That’s what we’re trying to do at Big Brothers Big Sisters.”



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