

The Miami Times

Pay it forward with mentoring

Closing the gap could save Black children

January 10, 2018

By Nyamekye Daniel



Elvis “Austin” Caines has dedicated a majority of his career to the juvenile justice system.

For more than a decade, Caines has seen hundreds of Black youth being processed into the Miami-Dade County Juvenile Services Department, where he works as a supervisor, with the knowledge that the detainees will not get the same treatment as their counterparts.

After doing research, Caines found a way to break the cycle — mentoring.

“When I was in grad school doing research on the overrepresentation of minorities in the juvenile justice system, I found that Black and Hispanic children would come into the system with the same offense as whites, but they are treated totally different,” said Caines. “But I also found out that mentoring was a solution.”

After getting a referral for mentorship training 16 years ago from his church, Norland United Methodist Church, Caines signed onto Big Brothers Big Sisters Miami as a mentor. It made a positive difference in two Miami Garden boys' lives.

Mentoring is a "practical, cost-effective and meaningful" way to make a change in society, said Gale Nelson, the president of Big Brothers Big Sisters Miami.

"The annual cost of mentoring a child is \$1,500 annually," Nelson said, "versus the cost to incarcerate a child that could be upwards into \$80,000."

Nelson said that most people have the impression that mentoring is equivalent to adopting a child or can be time-consuming, but Nelson said it is easier than people think.

There are many available options for mentoring that can accommodate any lifestyle, according to Nelson.

"That could mean one hour a week in a school, that could mean once a month in a workplace where you don't even leave the job to be a mentor," he said. "That could mean face-to-face in a community-based program."

Caines and his "little brothers" were able to connect through basketball and just one-on-one conversations.

His first mentee is now 23 years old and his current, Stephen Kelly, is in the 10th grade at Barbara Goleman Senior High School.

Caines has mentored Stephen for the last six years, and said that he plays a very active role in the teen's life. He participates in after-school activities, although he lives miles away from his school, which requires Caines to help with transportation.

The two first met when Stephen was 9. He had behavioral issues so severe that the boy required medication, both said. But after a few years of their mentorship, Stephen was able to stop being prescribed.

"His grades went from 'Ds' and 'Fs' to 'As' and 'Bs'," said Caines. "I helped him

get in enrolled in Miami-Dade [College] courses, and he serves as the District 1 representative on the Miami-Dade County Youth Commission.”



Elvis “Austin” Caines, Stephen Kelly and Morris Copeland, director of the Miami-Dade County Juvenile Services Department.

Stephen wants to follow in his mentor’s steps and enter into the law enforcement field; he expressed his gratitude to Caines in an essay he wrote for a contest in April 2016.

In the essay titled, “Overwhelming Gratitude,” Stephen thanked Caine for pushing him in the right direction.

“Since we met four years ago, I have made a noticeable change in the way I interact with others, and I know now how to express myself without feeling the need to get riled up,” Stephen wrote. “I can only thank Elvis for always being there for me and supporting me.”

When Caines finished his mentoring training those years ago, he wanted to make sure he was placed with someone who looks like him and was from the same neighborhood.

Nelson said that even though 65 percent of the children who participate in the program are Black, only 22 percent of the volunteers are. There is also a disparity in gender. For every three women who volunteer there is one man.

Most of the mentoring gaps are in the Brownsville, Miami Gardens, Liberty City and Homestead communities.

For the last six decades, Big Brothers Big Sisters Miami has matched children

with mentors to help set a good example for them in the community.

January is the perfect time to reflect on the impact that mentoring has in society since it is National Mentoring Month. However, Nelson said, it always the perfect time to help reduce drop-out rates, poverty and incarcerations through mentoring.

“We see the results in terms of graduating...95 percent of our kids go on to graduate from Miami-Dade schools,” said Nelson. “But there is a disparity, and I won’t be doing my job if I didn’t make it clear that we need more men and women of color to step up and get involved and help children who look like them and come from the neighborhoods they come from.”