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Mentors change kids' perspectives

Big Mirror program gives at-risk children and teens a new way of seeing themselves

By DEIDRE WILLIAMS

NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Sometimes all it takes for a kid to see beyond a life of hard knocks is to have a positive, consistent bond with an adult mentor who is successful, looks like them, likes the same food and music and speaks the same language.

It's like looking into a mirror and realizing there are opportunities they never knew existed, said Edward Jackson, a "big" with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Erie County.

Jackson developed the agency's Big Mirror program so that minority children can see a reflection of themselves in their Big Brother or Big Sister. The initiative involves current mentors, alumni and community members focused on increasing the ethnic diversity of the program's adult volunteers.

"How awesome would it be for these children to see young, African-American college men and women, doctors, teachers, upstanding members of the community of color," said the 31-year-old Jackson, who will emcee the organization's Magical Moments Gala on Saturday at the Seneca Niagara Casino & Hotel. Dinner and awards begin at 7 p.m.

Jackson, who is working on his

second master's degree — this one in family therapy at the University of Rochester — is a former Big Brothers Big Sisters case manager who was bothered by the lack of black and Hispanic mentors available for boys. He left for another job but recently rejoined the staff part time and became a Big Brother himself because he remembered how few mentors of color were working with the kids.

"It would break my heart," he said. "It was almost a disservice to the 'littles.'"

The numbers tell the story, said Alicia Bartsch, director of community relations for the organization. Only 23 percent of the program's mentors identify themselves as minority, while 83 percent of the children are African-American or Hispanic. Of the kids on the waiting list, 84 percent

are nonwhite, with the majority being African-American or Hispanic.

Demetrius Brown, 14, has been Jackson's "little" for about three years. A freshman at Hutchinson-Central Technical High School, Demetrius is one of five boys being raised by a single mother on Roetzer Street off Walden Avenue on the

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Charles Lewis/Buffalo News

Demetrius Brown, 14, left, shares a laugh with his Big Brother, Edward Jackson, at Spot Coffee on Delaware Avenue Thursday. Jackson has been mentoring Brown for about three years.