

AREA BOYS STRUGGLE TO FIND MENTORS

Author(s): Lisa Palmer, Globe Correspondent **Date:** January 25, 2004 **Page:** 1 **Section:** Globe North

At Sunnyside Lanes in Danvers, James Agosto, 37, recently wrapped his hand around the green bowling ball, demonstrating his casual grip.

"Try not to throw it so hard," he said, passing the ball to Juan Carrassquill, 13, who rolled it toward the center of Lane 11. The ball toppled several duckpins. One remained upright, wobbling. As Carrassquill shook his fist in disappointment, Agosto said, "Wait, man. You can't give up on that one yet. Give it some time. Blow on it." Sure enough, the pin fell.

Agosto of Peabody, a Big Brother volunteer, provides friendship and frequent words of encouragement to his Little Brother, Carrassquill, of Lynn, during their bowling, dinner, and baseball outings every other week. The pair is among 135 matches that Big Brothers of Massachusetts Bay oversees on the North Shore and Cape Ann.

However, 300 area boys who signed up for a Big Brother will likely wait a year before finding a match, despite twice as many adult males volunteering for the role over the last three years.

The reason? According to John Pearson, executive director of Big Brothers of Massachusetts Bay in Boston, the number of boys looking for a positive adult male role model has consistently outpaced the Big Brother volunteer pool. The group has observed the most growth within Latino and Asian populations, Pearson said.

"The level of need is deepening among those who are in need," Pearson said, referring to the rising number of families facing unemployment, social service agency cutbacks, and financial crises who get referred to his agency.

Pearson said that although the number of boys referred to Big Brothers has increased, and the waiting time is about a year, the divide used to be much worse. "In 2001, boys waited upwards of two years for a Big Brother match," he said. The Big Brother organization has joined forces with the National Mentoring Partnership to encourage individuals to volunteer as a mentor. January is National Mentoring Month.

Pearson credits the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks for sending a slew of men to his agency's aid. "A month after Sept. 11, we had 100 new volunteers for our agency," he said. Since then, volunteer numbers have built steadily.

Still, boys in this region wait the longest of any in Greater Boston for a match. In Cambridge, a typical match takes three months. "A lot of it has to do with what a parent requests," he said.

"There is a lot of cross or interracial matching, but often a match with a Big [Brother] of the same race is the best match."

Currently, two-thirds of the wait-listed boys are white, and 10 percent are African-American. The remaining 25 percent are Latino, Asian, and mixed races. "The sad part is that we are only reaching seven to 10 percent of the targeted boys in at-risk populations," Pearson said.

Pearson said that a lot of men are concerned that being a Big Brother is a large responsibility or takes too much time. "All you have to know is how to be a friend to somebody," he said. Big Brothers are asked to meet with their Little Brother twice a month for a couple hours per visit.

Agosto, who was born in New York but grew up in Puerto Rico, is among a handful of Latino Big Brothers volunteering in the region this year. He said he often heard stories about the Big Brothers organization from his father, who had lived in New York City for 30 years before moving back to Puerto Rico in the early 1970s.

Agosto, who is married, works as a defense contract auditor and as a seaman in the Navy Reserve. Last year, he saw a television ad for the Big Brothers organization, which started in New York 100 years ago. He submitted to background checks and interviews. He supplied references and filled out surveys. Last summer he was notified of his Little Brother.

Carrassquill, an eighth-grader, was born in Puerto Rico and moved to Lynn from Connecticut two years ago. Agosto immediately found common ground with Carrassquill, who also loves playing baseball and cheering for the New York Yankees. The two met in August after the Big Brothers staff determined their hobbies, geographic location, and backgrounds corresponded.

"We hit it off," said Agosto. "Now, I see him as a little brother. When I hear about him doing well in school, sports, or in his family, I feel proud of him. I can see now that he's going to be a very good man."

