



THE BUSINESS OF GIVING

EXECUTIVES MENTOR YOUTH FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE

BY JEFF ZBAR

One day each month, you'll find Galina Ilcheva at her desk in the human resources department at the JW Marriott Marquis with Caitlyn, a high school senior she's mentoring.

A 10-year mentor with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Miami's School to Work program, Ilcheva discusses her job and career with Caitlyn, as well as the "soft skills" of the professional world. Ilcheva hopes the insights she shares will set her "Little" up for success when she heads off to college and beyond. Mentorship has also been personally and professionally rewarding for Ilcheva.

"It fills our emotional bank account," said Ilcheva, the hotel's director of human resources who also serves as its coordinator for School to Work. This fall, it will host almost 20 high school students from Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

Whether shadowing a "Big" in the workplace or benefiting from a relationship in the community, mentorship plays a vital role in the lives of young people nationwide. Six in 10 youth ages 18 to 21 had a mentor in 2022, according to a 2023 study from MENTOR. Structured mentorship in social programs — like school-, community- or faith-based initiatives — or those in a business setting, like the School to Work program, can create supportive, caring and educational relationships between mentors and mentees. As society continues to emerge from the pandemic, mentorship also can strengthen youths' mental health needs borne from the isolation.

The School to Work program makes it easy for employers to participate in mentorship programs, said Gale Nelson, president and CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters of

Galina Ilcheva, a 10-year mentor with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Miami's School to Work program, discusses her job and career with her "Little," Caitlyn.

BIG BROTHERS BIG SISTERS OF MIAMI



Miami. Students are driven by bus to the workplace, which helps remove "inconvenience" as a barrier to involvement, he said. The day is scheduled to help the Big manage their time and maximize life and work skills learned. Job shadowing may include answering the phone, or just watching and learning from their Big at work.

Along the way, Bigs from early partners the Miami Heat, Carnival Corp. and Burger King, as well as

Ryder System, Baptist Health South Florida and other employers, are sharing life and career skills, Nelson said. They're also introducing kids to careers. After mentoring at Homestead Hospital, one Little went on to become a registered nurse.

Over 500 Littles a year participate in the program, which has had about 9,000 since it launched in 2006.

By 1 p.m., the Little is back on

the bus to return to school. With each student, employers are leaving "a lasting legacy by investing in their company's own success," Nelson said. "It helps with employee retention. This is your employee culture."

Employers of any size can mentor. Last year, Rently Resorts, a part of Boca Raton-based NDM Hospitality Services LLC, mentored two high school scholarship recipients from the Horatio Alger Association,

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CEO Nicholas Falcone said. Mentees learned skills to support their entrepreneurial interests, he said.

Like the Alger Association, Rently is "encouraging youth to pursue their dreams through higher education."

For executives or professionals of any age hoping to give of their time and talent as mentors, a host of organizations help create those connections.

Take Stock in Children of Florida, for example, has 45 affiliates pairing some 8,500 low-income sixth to 12th graders in all 67 Florida counties with volunteer adult mentors and college readiness coaches. They meet in school to discuss life skills and ensure the student's academic journey is progressing, said Jillian Hasner, the organization's president and CEO.

"Life skills are equally important to be college and career ready as getting that A on your test last week," she said.



To date, some 44,000 youths have participated in Take Stock's mentorship program, Hasner said. The organization had over 11,300 mentors and coaches in 2023. Students who successfully complete the college readiness program can earn a Florida Prepaid college scholarship, funded in partnership with the state, she said. Some 7,000 stu-

dents are in the college program. In South Florida, mentor partnerships include TIAA Bank, JM Family Enterprises, People's Trust and Bank of America, she said. Mentors also include police officers, firefighters, retired seniors and others from throughout the community. The goal is for each student to have the same mentor

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TAKE STOCK IN CHILDREN OF FLORIDA

throughout the program. "We couldn't succeed without employers allowing their employees to be a mentor," Hasner said.

She traces business involvement in youth mentorship back to Gov. Jeb Bush. More recently, Florida First Lady Casey DeSantis pushed for in-class coaching and mentorship to boost mental health and "resiliency" for students in K-12 schools.

"The difference [mentorship and volunteering] makes for the state is huge," Hasner said.

The difference is huge for the mentor, too. Ilcheva's co-workers at her hotel and others owned by MDM Development Group have become mentors. The lesson for the mentor is simple.

"If you want a better future, a better world, a better opportunity for the kids, it starts with you," she said. "You can say, 'I left my mark on this world, on my Little. They will be their best self.'"