

## Big Brother of the Year is “hope, love and a future” for teen he mentors

*By Rebecca D. Williams*

Posted May 13, 2014 at 5:30 p.m.

Deonte' Blair is pictured earlier this year with his Big Brother Ken Miller. Big Brothers Big Sisters of Tennessee has named Miller as Tennessee's Big Brother of the Year. Blair will graduate on May 17 from Karns High School and has been accepted to Tennessee Tech University in Cookeville. (Shana Love/Special to the News Sentinel) Just don't ask them to run together. "He runs slow," said Deonte, laughing. Miller jogs for health, while Deonte sprints in track and field events at school.

Miller and Deonte met in 2007, when Deonte was 10 years old. They were matched through Big Brothers Big Sisters of East Tennessee. In April, Miller was named Tennessee's "Big Brother of the Year," for being a dedicated mentor to Deonte. He's up for the national award in June. "I'm more embarrassed by that than anything," said Miller. "Deonte's like family."

Deonte's mother, Shana Love, said she requested a big brother for her son because his own father wasn't around. Love said Deonte has a sister, mother, grandmother and great-grandmother.

"Well, as a mom I have a son I just couldn't relate to," said Love. "It's not an issue with his behavior. He just needs a male role model, a positive role model."

Over the years, Miller and Deonte have met at least once a week.

"We've been to UT football, basketball, Lady Vols basketball, a Titans game, snow skiing in North Carolina," said Miller.

"He's been on several family vacations with us, to Atlanta at least a couple of times. The beach last summer and probably this summer."

For weeks, they worked on making a wooden treasure box and trophy rack for Deonte. In 2008, Love and her children bought a home through Habitat for Humanity, and Miller worked on the build with the family.

Sometimes they do yard work, and soon they'll plant okra, one of Deonte's favorite vegetables.

“Mostly we just do what guys do. Chill, hang out, cook, eat. Just relax,” said Deonte. “He can usually out-eat me.”

“I don’t know, last time you ate two burgers,” said Miller.

Ken Miller, right, and Deonte Blair, in 2007, had just begun their Big Brother/Little Brother relationship when they built a treasure box for Deonte.

Miller said he was recruited to the Big Brothers program at his church, Ball Camp Baptist. He also said his wife, Gay, was in favor of it from the start.

“She should be the one to get the award,” said Miller. “She used to be a teacher at Karns High School, and she knows what high school students do and shouldn’t do. Deonte’s always been a good kid, but one time he skipped class. Boy, she let him know under no uncertain terms is that allowed!

“We always stress education,” said Miller. “We’ve been able to talk to him about college and what classes to take and things.”

Love said Miller has never been late or a no-show for an activity with Deonte.

Miller was named Tennessee Big Brother of the Year for mentoring Deonte for seven years.

“Ken is hope, love and a future. He makes Deonte smile,” said Love. “He has proven to Deonte that he can trust someone. He is not family, but he has fulfilled the shoes of being a brother and mentor. He has always been there.”

Deonte has been accepted to Tennessee Tech University for the fall. Until he leaves, he and Miller will likely spend more time together.

Recently, Deonte chopped onions in Miller’s kitchen to jazz up a frozen pizza for their dinner. As he sliced, his eyes began watering.

“Are you crying? Oh, he’s sad that he’s leaving me!” Miller teased him.

“Having Ken as part of my life has been a plus for me,” said Deonte. “He’s been there to guide me, give me good advice about what to do, what not to do. He’s changed me to be a better man, a man my mama would be proud of.”

“Now you’re making me cry,” said Miller.

### **A call for male mentors**

The Big Brothers Big Sisters of East Tennessee matches hundreds of children in the Knoxville area with mentors.

The program needs more men to match with boys. “Most of our volunteers are white females, and most who need services are African American boys, so we’re constantly in need of men,” said Lisbeth Couser, chief development officer.

More about Big Brothers Big Sisters of East Tennessee: <http://www.tennesseebig.org/site/>