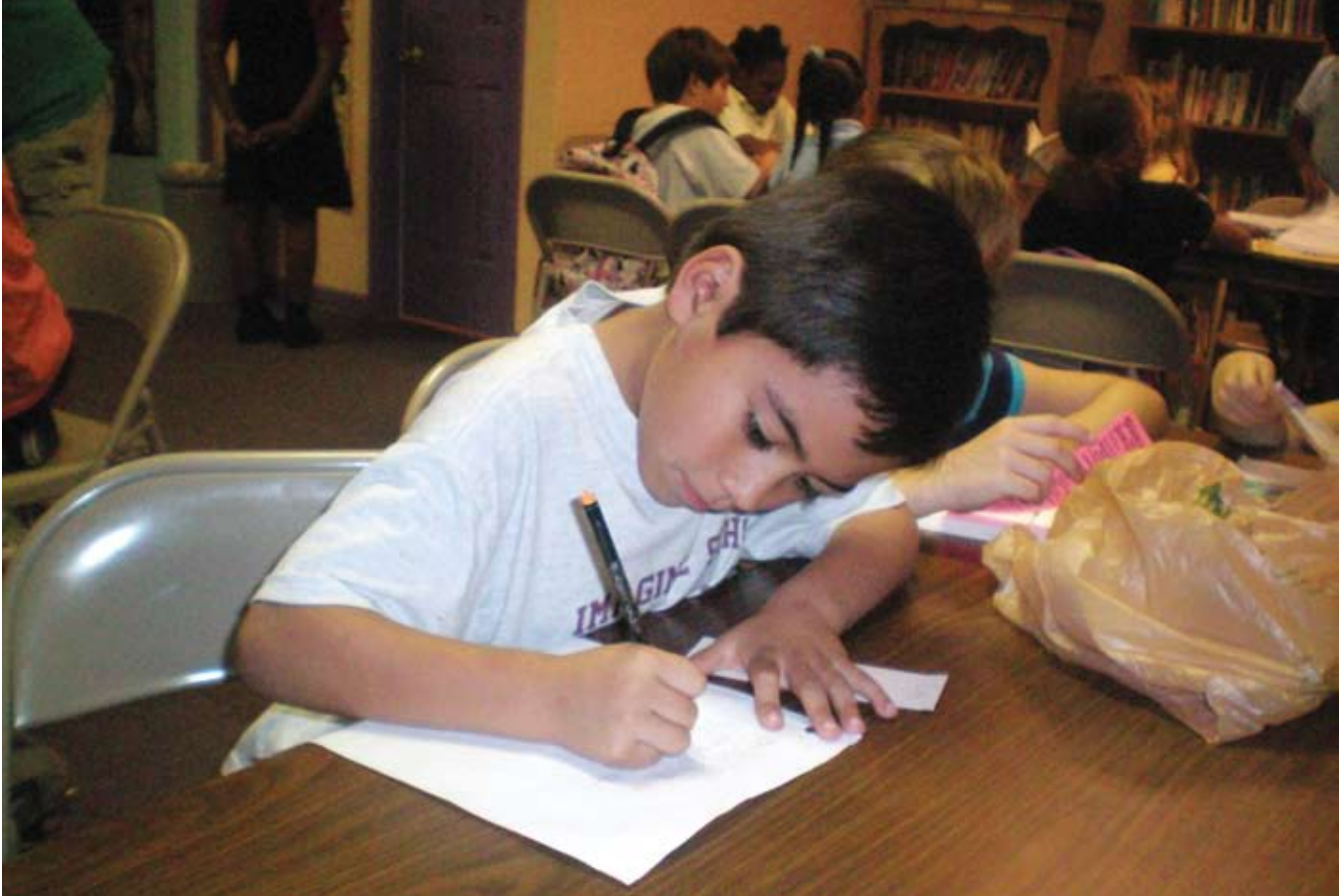


Boys & Girls Clubs of Indian River County are giving fresh hope to the youngsters who need it most.

A POSITIVE PLACE FOR KIDS

BY ANN TAYLOR



Members of the Boys & Girls Clubs take doing their homework seriously during what is called “Power Hour;” statistics show that 87 percent complete their class assignments before leaving the Club each day. Through core programs – Education, Career Development, Health and Life Skills, the Arts, Character and Leadership Development, Sports – youngsters ages 6 to 18 are encouraged to realize their full potential as productive citizens.

When the last school bell of the day rings at 3 p.m. nearly 18,000 children throughout the county leave their classrooms. Some head home where a parent or caregiver is waiting, some participate in an extracurricular program, and others go off to work – yet far too many are left on their own. Without adult supervision or access to an after-school program, they are in danger of either becoming the victim of a crime or committing a crime themselves. Ronnie Hewett is in the business of seeing that that doesn't happen.

“Studies have shown that kids who belong to the Boys & Girls Clubs are less likely to get involved with gangs, drugs

and alcohol, and are much more likely to stay in school and graduate,” says Hewett, president and CEO of the county-wide organization. “When children come to the Club they can expect to find four important things – a fun, clean and safe environment; a variety of programs that meet their needs and interests; fair and consistent discipline, and professional staff and volunteers who really care about them and want them to succeed in life. What sets us apart is that we are the only county-wide, facility-based youth development organization that provides programs every day after school and all day during the summer.”

This year marks the Boys & Girls Clubs of Indian River

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County's 10th anniversary and Jay McNamara, chairman of the board of directors, has been a driving force in the non-profit organization's growth, both in number of programs and members. "Out of over 18,000 school-age kids in the county, one in six is being positively affected by what we do. Now that's a mushroom effect," McNamara emphasizes.

"Our top priority is to help kids succeed in school and in life. We started in a classroom in Thompson Elementary School with 25 kids and, just like today, demand for our services exceeded our capacity. Now, with our new clubhouses in Vero Beach and Fellsmere under construction, along with our clubhouses in Sebastian and our Teen Center in Vero Beach, we will be able to serve more than 3,000 kids."

At present the Boys & Girls Club has three clubhouses in the county, two in Vero Beach and one in Sebastian, serving youngsters ages 6 to 18. The Club also operates the Youth Volunteer Corps, a teen outreach program that promotes character and leadership development for 11 to 18 year olds through practical exercises of volunteer experiences. With the combined sites, the Youth Volunteer Corps and outreach programs the organization currently reaches over 2,000 children each year.

The mission, "To inspire and enable all young people, especially those who need us most, to realize their full potential as productive, responsible and caring citizens," packs a punch when you consider that 88 percent of the members improved or maintained their general attitude, 87 percent finished their homework before they left the Club each day, 85 percent improved or maintained their grades, and 81 percent improved or maintained their conduct.

"It takes work," says Hewett, "51 percent of the children we serve are from single-parent homes, 43 percent come from families who make less than \$20,000 a year and 57 percent are eligible for free or reduced lunches at school."

No matter what their circumstances are, club members benefit from the Club's core programs: Education and Career Development, Health and Life Skills; the Arts; Character and Leadership Development; and Sports, Fitness and Recreation.

"Discipline is a very important component," Ronnie Hewett explains. "The older kids get to the Club first and they go straight to the learning center to do their homework. When the younger ones come in and after they get settled and have snacks they do the same."

As a result, the success stories are many and Johntavi-



Members joined in the groundbreaking celebration for the new 30,000-square-foot clubhouse on 17th Avenue across from the Freshman Learning Center. Along with a new facility currently under construction in Fellsmere, the Sebastian clubhouse and Teen Center in Vero Beach, the Boys & Girls Clubs will soon be able to serve more than 3,000 children.



Johntavious Metilus is congratulated by Jay McNamara after receiving the 2008 Youth of the Year award at the Boys & Girls Club annual Angels Help Our Kids Take Flight dinner. Johntavious told those in the audience, “Before, going to college was not really an option, but now I believe I’ll have opportunities for scholarships and continue to be as successful as I can be.”

ous Metilus is a perfect example. Actively involved in the Club’s Junior Staff and Passport to Manhood programs, vice president of the Keystone Club and a regular volunteer at Vero Beach High School and Habitat for Humanity, he was chosen the 2008 Youth of the Year at last year’s Angels Help Our Kids Take Flight dinner. Beaming and holding his award, Johntavious said, “The Boys & Girls Club opened up a lot of opportunities for me. Before, going to college was not really an option, but now I believe I’ll have opportunities for scholarships and continue to be as successful as I can be. I love the Club. It has become my second home.”

Board member Barry Wiksten was also at that awards dinner. “I had the privilege of talking with some of the parents who are so appreciative of what their children have become because of our programs. Johntavious’ mother was there and she was so happy and proud of her son.”

“Yet when Johntavious first came to the Club he sat in a corner and was very quiet, removed and skeptical. You could tell he wasn’t sure he wanted to be there,” Hewett recalls. “Eventually he really blossomed, became a mentor and spokesperson, the toast of the town.”

Another success story involves a youngster named Jake. Being the new kid coming through the door wasn’t easy, yet



Computers are a part of life today, and club members, many of whom do not have access to one at home, are taught how to gather information and solve problems via a variety of programs.



Club members rolled up their sleeves to help level the ground during a community service project. Volunteering is not only encouraged, it's enjoyed; last summer more than 40 Youth Volunteer Corps teens enthusiastically helped the Senior Resource Association deliver 1,200 Meals on Wheels to Gifford residents.

once he took a look around the education center with all of the computers and the activities going on in the art and game rooms it didn't take long for him to realize that the Club was a good place to be. His parents had recently divorced and he was living with his mother who, out of financial necessity, was working two jobs. Before he became a member Jake had been on his own after school. Later, when asked what the Club has meant to him, he said, "It means everything. Without it I probably would have a record. I've learned how to deal with challenges that come my way and to find the positive in every situation."

On any given school day more than 200 children are involved in clubhouse programs, with the majority spending approximately 3½ hours there. During the summer that number swells to 275 daily during an 11 hour time span; 65 percent of the children are between the formative years of 6 and 12.

"We have an annual membership fee of \$35 per year and during the summer when the Club is open from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. we charge a very conservative fee per week that includes lunch," Hewett explains. "The Club is their place.

Each young person has a membership card with their picture and signature on it. That shows he or she belongs. We also have a parent handbook and parent orientation so the family is involved."

The rules are strict but you can see that the kids are happy to be there. "To me that's instant gratification," says Jay McNamara. "I'm retired after a career in New York many moons ago when I was chairman of McCann Erickson. Even when I was working, a percentage of my time was spent doing pro-bono work with youth. I saw that if someone is 10 years old you really can do so much more than when he's 18. That turned me on and it still does."

McNamara wanted his friend Barry Wiksten to be turned on, too. "Five years ago Jay talked me into going with him to the Club in Sebastian where I watched people helping kids with their programs," Wiksten says. "I've never seen a more disciplined group of kids, and their faces – they were so happy to be there. Part of what Ronnie and his team do is to provide a professionally trained staff and environment that can make real changes in kids' lives and their family lives."

Hewett himself had a significant change in his life 40



"I belong!" No wonder everyone is smiling as they hold up their Boys & Girls Clubs membership cards that identify them as being part of something special.

years ago, thanks to an uncle who introduced him to the Boys & Girls Clubs. "I was always a sports enthusiast, played all kinds of sports in high school. When I went to college I majored in physical education and was planning on working as a coach," Hewett recalls. "But my uncle, who really loved the Boys & Girls Clubs, kept talking about it so I sent my résumé to the national headquarters in New York. There was an opening in Lakeland, Florida. That was March of 1970 and I've been with the organization ever since. I went from Lakeland to California to South Carolina, back to California and then to Vero Beach. This has really been the best fit for me."

It has been the best fit for the Club as well. At the national organization's annual conference Hewett was recognized as the 2008 National Executive of the Year. Unbeknown to him, the staff and board of directors had submitted his name and the Club's growth and accomplishments under his watch. "It was really a surprise," he admits with a smile. "The most important and gratifying thing for me was reading all of the things that Jay and the staff had to say about me."

"I think the award also reflects something Ronnie has contributed and that is how well the organization manages its finances," Wiksten points out. "Charity Navigator, an independent charity evaluator, gave us a four-star rating for financial health and our being able to grow our finances in the most fiscally responsible way possible."

It's not easy, especially during the economic downturn, yet the increased need for more space in order to serve more kids prompted the Club's leadership to launch a capital campaign three years ago. The success of that campaign will be seen later this year with the opening of a new and larger facility on 17th Avenue, a new club in Fellsmere and the addition of an outdoor covered basketball court at the Sebastian Club.

The Boys & Girls Club is also expanding learning opportunities via a recently formed partnership with Growing Healthy Kids, an organization that uses garden-based education to teach children and their families about the importance of healthier eating and increased physical activity. Each week Sebastian Boys & Girls Club members participate in a variety of activities such as learning how to make

a miniature garden in a container, and on Wednesdays they go kayaking at the St. Sebastian River Preserve State Park, thanks to donated supplies from Kayaks, Etc.

Serving others is also encouraged. Last summer Youth Volunteer Corps teens partnered with the Senior Resource Association to help with the Meals on Wheels program. More than 40 youth volunteers delivered 1,200 meals to Gifford residents.

“We did a survey at the Sebastian Club where we asked the kids what their favorite activity was and the number one thing was doing community service, which is part of the human need to help others,” says McNamara. “Also, a recent study showed how much money the Boys & Girls Clubs save the community by keeping kids out of trouble. Before former Sebastian police chief Jim Davis retired he told me you have made my job so much easier.”

McNamara is always looking for ways to inspire young people and when he heard that Colin Powell was coming to Vero Beach, the light bulb went on in his head. What better person to say a few words to the kids?

“I got his phone number and called and spoke to someone who told me that he would be landing at 3 p.m., speaking at Riverside Theatre at 4 p.m. and leaving at 8 p.m., so he couldn’t possibly have a minute to spare. I said would you please tell him that we will have a very small group of kids at the airport to meet him,” McNamara grins at the memory. “The plane was late but Colin Powell stopped at each kid and said what do you want to be when you grow up? That was terrific – who knows what impact that will have on the kids who were there?”

Hewett nods in agreement. “What keeps me motivated is seeing what goes on at the clubs, seeing the Johntavious’ of the world and seeing changed lives every day. In some cases we save lives; if it were not for the Boys & Girls Clubs and what we’ve done where would some of these kids be? Thanks to our board of directors, staff, volunteers and investors, we are able to inspire and enable our young people to be the best they can be.”

To learn more visit www.bgcirc.org or call Ronnie Hewett at 299-7449. ❁



When Jay McNamara learned that Colin Powell would be in Vero Beach for a speaking engagement he made sure the four-star general and former U.S. Secretary of State was greeted by Club members. Even though Powell’s plane arrived late and timing was tight, he took a moment to talk with each child. As McNamara says, “Who knows what impact that will have on the kids who were there?”