



BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS OF HARLINGEN

CHILDREN DO WELL WHEN THEIR FAMILIES
DO WELL, AND FAMILIES DO BETTER WHEN
THEY LIVE IN SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES

2005 FAMILY STRENGTHENING AWARDS

PARENTS CREATE A HAVEN FOR HOPE

Harlingen, Texas lies in the heart of the Rio Grande Valley, a corridor of poverty that offers few long-term career opportunities. Of the city's four public housing developments, Lemoyne Gardens was the most troubled. "This community was a haven for despair," says Gerald Gathright, executive director of Boys & Girls Clubs of Harlingen. "But we were confident that if we engaged parents and youth together, we would have an effective strategy for change."

Partnering with the local housing authority, the Club established a 900-square-foot facility in an existing building in 1988. Almost from the first day, families rallied around the tiny Club—not more than a couple of small rooms—in the middle of Lemoyne Gardens. "We provided a place that would serve both parents and kids," says Gathright. "From there, families turned it into the thriving heart of their neighborhood."



WE KNEW THAT IF FAMILIES COULD FOCUS THEIR ENERGIES ON SOMETHING POSITIVE, THEY COULD TURN THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD AROUND AND IMPROVE THE PROSPECTS FOR THEIR CHILDREN.

—Gerald Gathright, Executive Director, Boys & Girls Clubs of Harlingen

DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY FOR PARENTS AND CHILDREN

To make the Club a place where parents would want to come inside and stay awhile, staff created a fun and appealing environment for adults as well as their children. Volleyball, exercise classes and bingo now invite parents to see the Club as a family affair. “Once parents spend time at the Club,” says Gathright, “they want to do more and more to make it a success for their children.”

Through the Parent Volunteer Program, parents do almost every job at the Club, including staffing the registration counter, organizing tournaments and contests, and mentoring young people. “These duties help parents build confidence and relationships with their children,” says Gathright. “They are running the Club, and they are also setting an example of responsibility for the next generation.”

When a new, freestanding Club was finally built in 1998, parents helped design the facility. “The housing authority wanted us to include a weight room,” remembers Gathright. “But the families pushed for a giant kitchen and family room that they could enjoy together. Today, you see grandmothers cooking with their grandchildren.”

Lemoyne Gardens is a different place now, with less crime, gang activity and drug use. “Parents and children are interacting more, and families are connecting with their neighbors,” says Gathright. “Our Club is not about providing specific programs. It’s about building strong relationships within families and bringing families together to create a community.”

FAMILIES COUNT FAMILY STRENGTHENING AWARDS

Through a joint venture of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Boys & Girls Clubs of America, the FAMILIES COUNT Family Strengthening Awards recognize Club programs that work to give children what they need most—strong, capable and economically successful families. Responding to the varied needs of the families they serve, these organizations improve the economic prospects of working men and women and create the services and networks of support that all families need to realize their aspirations for themselves and their children.

This year, Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) and its vital programs will reach nearly 4.5 million young people and their parents in 3,700 neighborhoods and rural communities. BGCA's professional staff will support and engage parents as their school-age children learn character and leadership development, vocational training, healthy behaviors and benefit from a wide range of academic and cultural pursuits. "We not only change the trajectory of a young person's life today but also the trajectory of their children's lives tomorrow," says BGCA President Roxanne Spillett. "That's why we call our work family-strengthening and generation-changing."

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Award-winning Program: Parents Volunteer Program

Gerald Gathright, Executive Director

1209 West Washington

Harlingen, TX 78550

956-428-4183