



BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS OF HARRISONBURG AND ROCKINGHAM COUNTY

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

2005 FAMILY STRENGTHENING AWARDS

FROM ISOLATION TO CONNECTION

In the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, isolation marks the lives of many among Rockingham County's 30,000 families, spread over 851 square miles of forest, farmland and steep mountains. It also marks the challenges these families face in helping their children expand their options for bright futures.

Through a coordinated effort involving parents and community stakeholders, the Boys & Girls Clubs of Harrisonburg and Rockingham County has developed an array of programs to counteract this isolation, linking families to one another and to resources they need to succeed.

"Because families are spread out, supporting them really means building community," says Executive Director Heather Denman. "Many of them are economically disadvantaged, and some parents speak very little English. But as parents, they want their children to succeed in life. That's the Clubs' goal, too, and we become partners in this work."



SUPPORTING FAMILIES IN ISOLATED
COMMUNITIES MAKES US WORK HARDER
TO ENGAGE THEM. AND WHEN WE DO, THE
BENEFITS FOR CHILDREN ARE ENORMOUS.

—Heather Denman, Executive Director, Boys & Girls Clubs of Harrisonburg and Rockingham County

WORKING HAND-IN-HAND

The Club staff begin by listening to parents about what they need and want to support their children. Advisory boards of parents, teachers and other community members then join staff to take action. In one instance, rising gang activity led to collaboration with police on a course teaching parents to recognize signs of youth gang involvement. In another, immigrant parents asked the Clubs to offer ESL classes, so they could find better jobs and improve their families' standard of living. County schools supported the project with free space, books and transportation.

"Parents usually hear from someone only when their child has a problem," says Denman. "We want them working with us, as fully vested partners, in building their family's strengths."

Parents also help design the programs for Family Nights, monthly get-togethers that attract up to 90 families. Family Nights begin with a shared meal, often cooked by families themselves. The evening then moves into family-strengthening activities that range from seminars about Earned Income Tax Credits or free medical screenings to tutorials helping children with reading and math. Each Family Night concludes with an awards ceremony, talent show or a musical performance that allows parents to experience some of what their children are learning in Club activities.

"Parents are voting with their feet," adds Denman. "They are coming to Family Nights, they are coming to meetings that shape Club programs, and all of that means they are taking new steps for their children!"

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: Family Support Program

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