

● USA TODAY | BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS PROVIDE VITAL SUPPORT

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Join the Club

Boys & Girls Clubs of America offers vital community support



BY JENNIFER BRADLEY FRANKLIN

THE FIRST TIME JOSIAS R. WALKED THROUGH THE doors at his local Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) in Bristol, Conn., he felt awkward and unsure of himself. A friend asked the STEM-loving teen to become a robotics mentor for other youth. "I was terrified," he recalls of that initial visit. Fast-forward four years, and the 19-year-old found his voice — and his confidence — and was named a 2020-2021 BGCA Youth of the Year to honor his commitment to the club.

Josias, who is open about being on the autism spectrum, learned to embrace his potential. "I've struggled



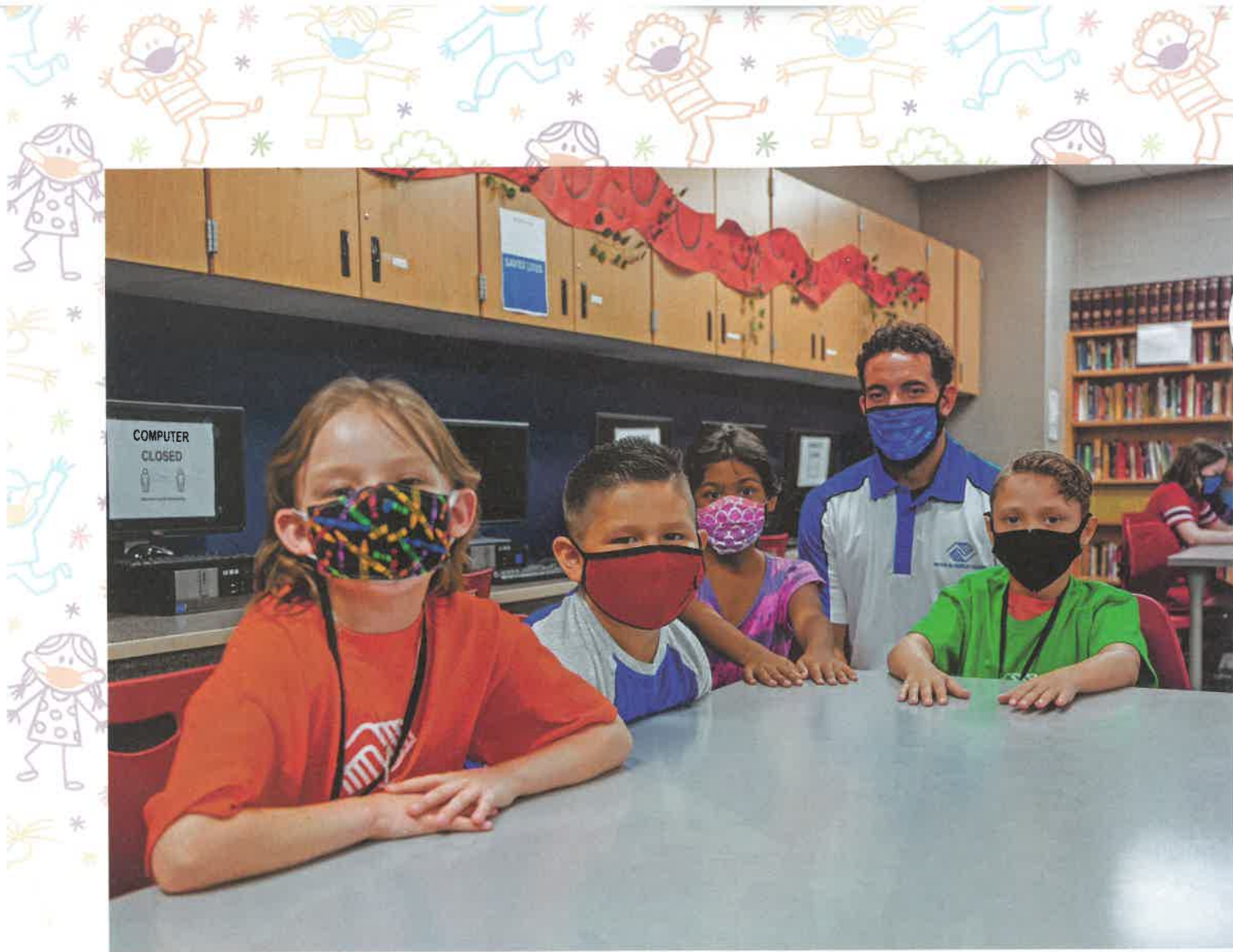
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throughout my life to feel confident and in interacting with a lot of people," he says. "The club took me out of my comfort zone, shaped me into the leader that I am today and (helped me realize I was) wanting to do STEM education." His time with the organization, which he continues to serve, has led him to pursue a college degree that will allow him to be a professional educator. His story exemplifies the metamorphosis that typically happens with BGCA, heightened



during the challenges of the pandemic era.

"(In general) the clubs provide a safe place and space for both learning and exploration," says Misty Miller, BGCA's senior vice president for organizational development. "For many young people, the club is the place that they can go to discover who they are as individuals and to explore that. In some cases, kids go for academic support. Sometimes they go just because their parents are working and they need to stay safe, and other times they go because their >



friends are there. It's really about safety and exploration, and realizing their full potential."

Quick Pivot

In an average year, with the help of more than 400,000 trained staff and volunteers, BGCA serves 4.6 million children and teens around the nation in more than 4,700 local clubs. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic upended everything from school days to extracurricular activities, the clubs stepped up to help their members and the communities in meaningful ways, including learning assistance for students in virtual school, food insecurity programs and technology support. The organization has seen its share of national crises, recessions and, yes, pandemics, since its founding in 1860.

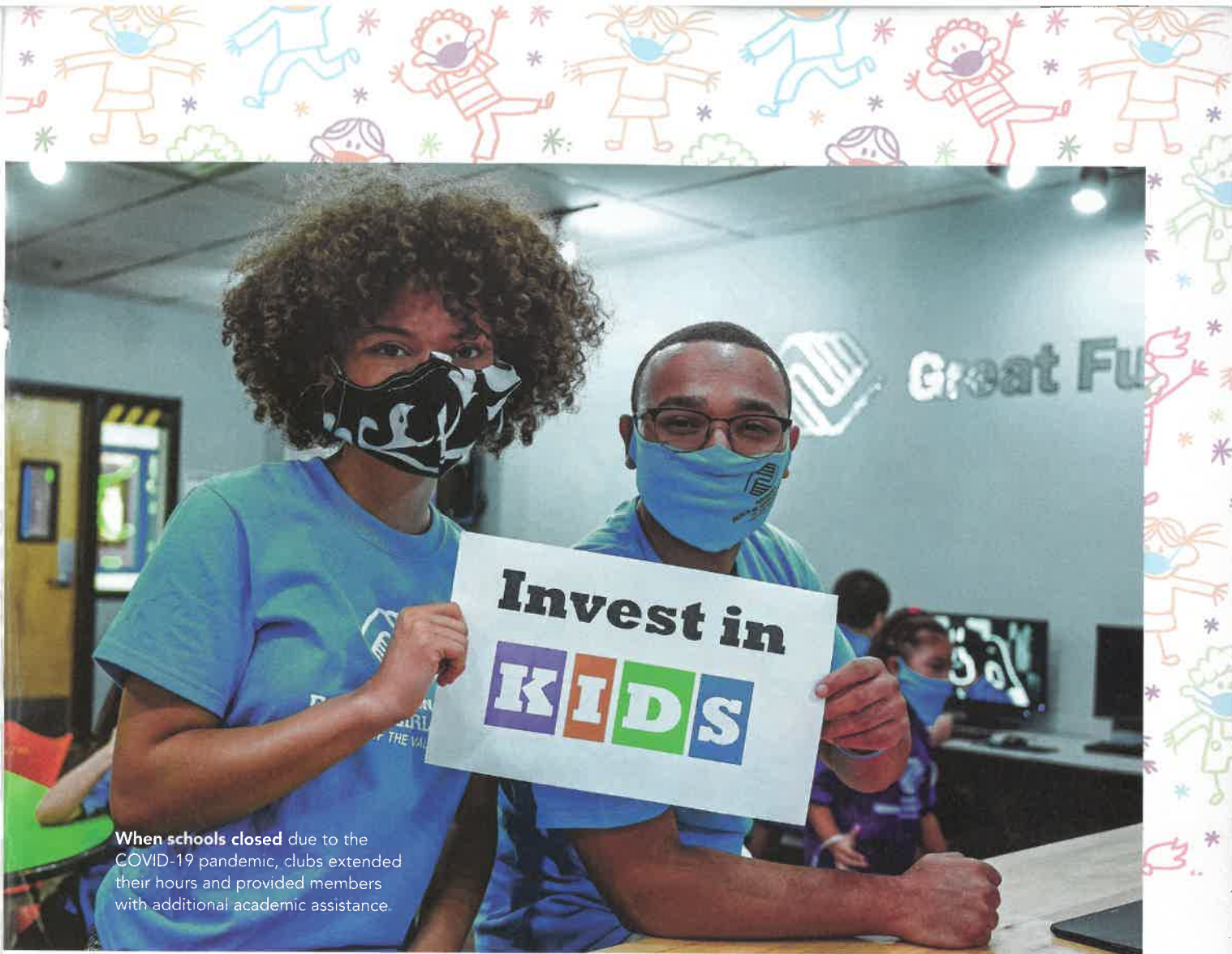
"One of the things that's special is our history and that we've had the opportunity to pivot in the 160 years (we've been around)," says Miller, who has been with the organization for 20 years. "It has been fun, interesting and inspiring to see our clubs stay relevant in their

communities. It's a grassroots effort, driven at the local level."

The local clubs recognized the needs, not just in young people, but in the wider communities they serve. When the pandemic ramped up in spring 2020, clubs mobilized to safely provide services to essential workers and their families. When schools switched to virtual learning, club leadership recognized the need for meal distribution.

"School was one of the places kids got their food," Miller says. "When school shut down, our clubs stood in that gap for many young people. It wasn't just providing meals to kids, but sometimes to the entire family." Other pandemic-motivated pivots included wellness checks for kids and providing direct economic assistance in the form of cash to families who couldn't afford utility bills.

Stepping up to assist with students' adjustment from in-person learning to remote school, BGCA provided more than 17,000 laptops and tablets for kids without devices; more than 1,000 clubs went from operating before- and after-school hours to being open all day to >



When schools closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, clubs extended their hours and provided members with additional academic assistance.

Mentoring Matters

Mentoring is a key component of BGCA's success, and with some distance learning and social distancing mandates still in place, it's more vital than ever. Mentors can help prevent drug use, encourage teens to pursue higher education and promote positive mental health.

BGCA says mentored teens are 50 percent less likely to skip school. And according to the organization's Youth Outcome Initiative report, mentored teens are:



40%

more likely to graduate high school on time

55%

more likely to enroll in college

43%

more likely to volunteer every month

51%

more likely to hold leadership positions

For more inspiring BGCA stories, ways to get involved or to register your child, visit bgca.org.



BGCA staff and volunteers provide group and one-on-one mentoring and support.

accommodate children who needed adult supervision; and clubs created Wi-Fi hot spots to facilitate virtual learning. “Clubs have remained relevant in a big way in service to all young people. The pandemic didn’t leave out any group,” Miller says.

Positive Outcomes

Instead of simply surviving, many club members have thrived, even during the pandemic. For example, when many schools shut their doors last March, 10-year-old Chloe needed support and supervision to continue her schoolwork while her grandmother and primary caregiver worked. She joined the Boys & Girls Clubs of Muncie in Indiana, and through peer groups and mentoring, she realized a budding aptitude for math she didn’t know she had. And using the club’s sewing machine, she began making masks as a way to support her community.



Josias R.

The clubs aren’t just for youth in economically or otherwise disadvantaged situations; they’re for everyone. Clubs meet members where they are, helping prepare them for whatever their future holds by developing character, a sense of responsibility and the tools for living a healthy life.

Josias is a prime example of the transformational power of being an active club participant. He’s made lasting friendships and discovered confidence he never thought possible. **“Life pushes you down, regardless of if you’re on the spectrum or not. I had all this baggage in the past, and I felt like I couldn’t function as I was,”** he says of the time before he became active in the club. Now he’s primed to choose a fulfilling future that will undoubtedly include continued involvement in the organization that has given him so much. “I’m always going to be involved in my club in some capacity,” he says. ■



Important Partnerships

This year, BGCA announced a partnership with the National CARES Mentoring Movement to expand support for youth struggling with racially charged violence and other inequality in their communities. It's important work: According to consulting firm McKinsey & Company, students were projected to have lost an average of five to nine months of learning due to the pandemic by June 2021. Students of color could be as much as a full year behind. BGCA is committed to helping all youth — regardless of their ethnicity — thrive by setting them up for future success with leadership and academic skills and character building.

As Taylor W., a member of the Boys & Girls Club of Albany, Ga., wrote, "No matter who you are, where you come from or the color of your skin, everybody is treated the same here. Everyone has the same potential to be a leader, and everyone has the same responsibilities to live up to it."

76%
of BGCA members ages 12 to 18 from under-resourced communities who attend clubs regularly reported receiving mostly A's and B's, compared with

64%
of their peers nationally.

97%
of club teens expect to graduate from high school.





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