

At 75, Boys & Girls Clubs has long reach



Members of the Walt Disney World Clubhouse Boys & Girls Club in Pine Hills served on the welcome committee for this month's 75th Anniversary celebration of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Florida. (White Dog Photography)



By **Kate Santich**
Orlando Sentinel

FEBRUARY 19, 2019, 6:00 AM

What do **Orange County** Mayor Jerry Demings, Orlando Police Chief Orlando Rolón, hotelier Harris Rosen, Shaquille O'Neal and TV news anchor Lisa Bell and have in common?

All are alumni of the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, which marked its 75th year in Central Florida this month, having grown from a single Quonset hut in Parramore to 35 clubs across seven counties. It has gone from helping a handful of white boys in Orlando to 15,000 boys and girls of all ethnicities, many from the region's most impoverished communities.

And it has matured from an after-school sports program to a \$14 million-a-year operation that teaches art, music, science and leadership to its members, and helps them apply to colleges and win scholarships.

In 2018, 100 percent of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Florida seniors graduated high school on time, and three-quarters of them went on to college. Another 8 percent attend vocational school; 12 percent planned to enlist in the military.

“[It’s] nothing short of extraordinary,” Demings said. “Where they’re not ending up is in our local jails.”

Demings was a member of what was once called the Carver Shores Boys Club — now the Universal Orlando Foundation Branch Boys & Girls Club. The organization, he said, “taught me more than just how to dribble a basketball or hit a baseball. They taught me how to treat people. They taught me how to dream.”

He also credits the organization with helping to propel a dramatic reduction in the number of Central Florida youth committing serious crimes.

“Ten years ago, when I was the director of public safety for the county, on any given day, that number [of children in Orange County jail] would have been over 100,” he said. “We’ve brought it down to 11 on average each day. That did not happen without having quality, positive alternatives in our community for children, like the Boys & Girls Clubs.”

Before 1990, when the organization formally added “& Girls” to its name, the main focus was diverting youthful energy to keep kids out of trouble. It gave those who might otherwise roam the streets a safe place to go after school and a network of friends and positive role models, mostly through physical activity.

“I played Little League baseball, half-pint football, we had a little gym where we played basketball, and then in back there was a handball court,” said David Hughes, 75, the retired CEO of Orlando-based Hughes Supply Inc., a Fortune 500 company. He attended a club in Parramore in the early 1950s.

“I think the most important thing I got there was the guidance, the mentoring, from the staff. Growing up, those years are so fragile, that to have someone steering you in the right direction is crucial.”

Dick Batchelor, a former state legislator who has spent decades advocating for children’s welfare, agreed. He, too, was a member of the Central Florida clubs, joining when his family moved into the public housing complex Reeves Terrace in 1957.

“It was really our home away from home, our social circle,” Batchelor said. “I think it gave me two things — one, additional stability outside the family, and, two, a chance to really learn to compete. It is so much more beyond sports. It really equips young people to have a chance at life.”

Ken Robinson, 60, president and CEO of [Dr. Phillips](#) Charities, said the club brought him friendships with kids from all backgrounds in his Pine Hills neighborhood. Yes, it gave him a place to play baseball, one of several athletic passions he had in his youth, but it also let him see different male role models and their

leadership styles.

As an adult, he supports the organization both as an individual and a philanthropic leader. Dr. Phillips Charities has donated about \$4.5 million to the Boys & Girls Clubs.

“I think the opportunity that they create for someone to move on in life, past the difficulties they’ve had, is crucial,” he said. “It’s not just a safe place to go after school; it’s also a place that can hold youth accountable and challenge them and reward them.”

That includes kids such as a 12-year-old Orlando Rolón, who spoke very little English when his family moved from Puerto Rico to an East Orange County in 1977. There, he learned about his new environment, managing money, different cultures and good sportsmanship.

“It didn't matter if you were white, black, Hispanic, Asian,” he said last week. “If you lived in our neighborhood, the boys club was the place where we would gather... And if it wasn't for the adult figures that were part of that boys club, who always taught us the importance of when to back down, when to take a step back, instead of allowing your egos to get the best of you, I wouldn't be here today.”

ksantich@orlandosentinel.com, 407-420-5503, @katesantich. Please consider supporting local journalism by purchasing a [digital subscription](#) to the Orlando Sentinel.

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