

situations that are decidedly not kind, nor fair, nor safe. Although there is a sizeable waiting list, "we always have slots for children through social services," says Mary Lew Sponski. And if the school system alerts them to a special situation, BGC will make room for a child in need. They even offer scholarships to qualified families.

The Boys and Girls Club is exactly that, a club, not a requirement. These kids want to be here. But predictably, attendance tails off, the older the kids become. Sheila Donnelly explains that after a child "graduates" from middle school, "they don't want to come back here. That's the middle school; I am so above the middle school," she does a perfect impression of an adolescent eye roll, and adds, "At high school they do have more opportunities for sports, band, theatre, art, everything. So, some of them we're losing but they've got their wings; they're ready to go."

Sheila pauses and adds, "But that group of kids, who are out on the streets, don't necessarily want to follow the rules that they have to follow when they're coming here. So, it's trying to find a balance between what opportunities can we offer them that they're going to enjoy enough that they're going to come back."

As it is, the teens who do attend are looked up to as mentors by the smaller children. "They're coming because they want to be here, and the ones who are coming, really are giving back a lot to our club."

This is borne out as L.B. Williams and Troy Johnson are nailing three-pointers in the gym. When Troy comes to the sideline, a little girl half his height runs up and hugs him. L.B.'s father, Benny Williams is a part-time staffer here; he runs the gym program. "If you like kids, this is the job to have," he says softly.

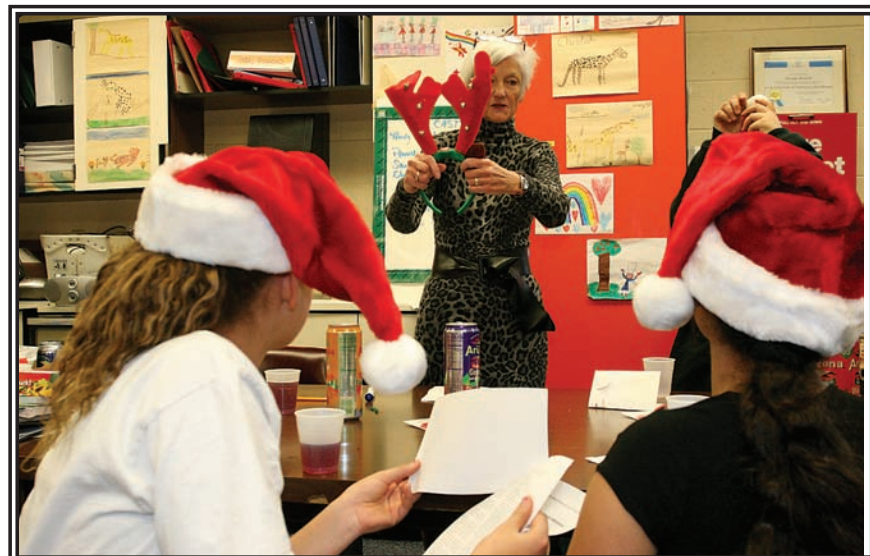
So what happens if a club member detours downtown instead to hang out and smoke cigarettes or something worse? "Boys and Girls Club has something called an open door policy, so any child here can leave any time of their own volition. It's a club; it's not a licensed day care center," says Sheila Donnelly. But she adds if a child does leave in the middle of the day, they will notify the parents.

"Who knows why parents send their kids here," says Mary Lew Sponski. "To be honest, some of them think it's cheap day care." In fact, some parents treat the entire school system as free day care, but that's another issue altogether. Boys and Girls Club fills that crucial time period from 2:30



Photos by Phil Audibert

Above, at the Boys and Girls Club of Orange, Power Hour is the first activity of the day...a quiet 60-minute period during which kids concentrate on their homework, before going on to other activities. For Brenna Terrill (left), Kaelyn Heany (center) and Haley Lucas (right) those other activities can be as diverse as playing sports or working on an art project. Below, the Torch Club is designed to promote a focus area known as Citizen and Leadership Development. Here, volunteer Gail Marshall (center) goes over casting assignments with Shaquasha Davis (left) and Courtney Seal (right) for a holiday play they will perform for the younger children.



till 6:00 p.m. or later, when kids could be getting in trouble. A BGC handout confirms that the juvenile crime rate doubles between the hours of 3:00 and 8:00 p.m.

The Boys and Girls Club is caught between two image extremes. On one side is what Sheila Donnelly calls "a very kind-of urban, city, ghetto, scary kind of thing, and that is so NOT what we are." The opposite extreme is based on the faulty logic, that if they can afford all these fancy galas (fundraising events), then it must be a babysitting service for rich kids. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Ask the kids themselves why they're here.

"I come to have fun and because my parents are at work." (Justin Lamb)

"Same exact thing for me." (Brock Warner)

"Because my dad gets off at about six and I come here to have fun." (Joshua "Bullet" Barnes)

"My mom and dad work and they said I could stay home during the summer, but I always come here. I have a lot of stuff to do at home, but it's just better here." (Abbey Yonts)

How about director Sheila Donnelly, why does she come here every day as she has for the past six years? "All those little shiny faces, all those smiles every day," she beams unhesitatingly.

Sheila came to BGC well-qualified; she ran the day care program at the Orange County Nursing Home for 18 years, caring for the infant sons and daughters of nursing home employees. One of those children, Loren Callahan, is a teen member of the Boys and Girls Club today. She and Sheila have been close friends literally since Loren was a babe in arms.

Mary Lew Sponski tells a story from the first year of the club's existence. It's about a family of latch-key kids. The eldest, a nine-year-old boy was the caregiver for his younger siblings. "And they all came into the club," she smiles. "For the first week that they were here, he wouldn't do anything for himself. He hung with his brother and sister. He stayed with them the whole first week; he wouldn't leave them. Finally Sheila took him aside and said, 'your brother and sister are fine. We'll take care of them. You can go have fun.'" Mary Lew mimics a child's brightening face. "It was like the weight of the world was lifted off of him."

That nine-year old just realized that he and his siblings were somewhere kind, fair and safe.



"Kind, fair and safe"

"Take my picture; take my picture.... Pleeeeeeeeeeeeze." I am thigh-high in a throng of kids and the only way to organize these smiling faces and pleading voices, is to make them all sit at the various round tables and at least pretend they are doing their homework. Then, and only then, will I take everybody's picture, knowing full well that there's no way the paper can print every one.

"Working hard on your homework is how to get your picture taken," cautions program director, Sheila Donnelly. The kids—in this case kindergarteners through third-graders—scramble for their chairs. It's Power Hour at the Boys and Girls Club of Orange...time to do homework, not pose for pictures.

Maybe it was during a Power Hour last month that Caleb Barnes wrote the now-famous letter entitled, "The reason I like the Boys and Girls Club." He scrawls the usual things about how he likes the computer and the Nintendo game, and he predictably misspells a couple of words, and then he hits you with the zinger. "The most thing I like is that it is kind, fair and safe."

Sheila Donnelly, mouth agape in stunned amazement, is speechless. Where did THAT come from, she asks breathlessly. Finally she blurts that under NO circumstances did she coach this child to write these prophetic words; it came from somewhere deep within him. Out of the mouths of babes....Caleb Barnes has managed to sum up in three simple words what the Boys and Girls



Photos by Phil Audibert

Top photo, close friends, Bridget Warner (left) and Magan Hayes hang together at the Boys and Girls Club of Orange. During the school year, Boys and Girls Club provides activities for kids from 2:30 till 6:00 in the evening when their working parents can come fetch them. In the summer the hours are from 8:00 till 5:30. Above, Sheila Donnelly has a lifetime of experience taking care of kids. Before becoming the Boys and Girls Club Director, six years ago, she ran the daycare program at the Orange County Nursing Home. And she took care of Loren Callahan (right) ever since she was a baby!

Club of Orange is all about: providing an afterschool environment, for kids age six to 18, that is truly kind... fair...and safe. As a parent what more could you want for your child?

Recently appointed Board member, Lou Thompson describes the local chapter as "a culture of nice." Looking past the peeling paint exterior of the tired old Prospect Heights building, he

noticed something special about this program. "Everywhere I went, the kids are polite and not unruly."

And it's true. Not trying to sound corny here, but these ARE nice kids; they smile and look you in the eye and shake your hand and say 'please' and 'thank you.' Anybody who says this next generation is going to hell in a hand basket, and, by the way, every generation says that about the next...our parents said the same thing about us...well, that person needs to come here.

Admittedly, Connor Fenwick is a ringer. He is my guide today. At age 10, he is tall for his age. He wants to be a football player just like his dad, Orange Police Chief Jim Fenwick. This youngster is remarkably poised and articulate. It's obvious that the other kids look up to him as a role model and he fills those shoes well. If he wasn't here, what would he be doing? "I would probably have a baby sitter or be going to after-care. I would be doing nothing much. This place is more fun. We can play basketball; we can play different games.... it's a great time to get homework done." One of the things Connor does along with Raven Washington is he reads aloud to the smaller kids. And he's found, as a result, his own reading skills have improved.



Photo by Phil Audibert

One of Connor Fenwick's (seated with book) duties at Boys and Girls Club is to read aloud to some of the younger kids, standing left to right: Brittney and Alana Beaudet, Morgan Aldoost, Evan Fenwick and Mathew Barnes. As a result Connor has found his own reading skills have improved.



Photo by Phil Audibert

Volunteer, Brandon Bienvenu helps Caleb Barnes (right) with his homework during Power Hour. Brandon, who travels from Charlottesville to Orange three times a week to help out, will soon launch a pilot program that divides the kids into teams that compete against each other in several different focus areas.

Has attending Boys and Girls Club made a difference in their school work? Director Sheila Donnelly says, "I can't say honestly that we've really tracked that, but I've certainly heard from their parents that they're getting their homework done and from teachers, that getting their homework done is obviously going to help the support they need in school." All the kids overhearing this conversation agree. "Yes!" they exclaim in unison. "I hate doing my homework at home because I can't play with my cats, can't play with my friends on the street," adds Abbey Yonts.

And it's not all homework, it's also fun. After the Power Hour, the kids can pretty much do whatever they want:

"Here, if you just want to do the gym, you can," says Sheila Donnelly. "We're obviously encouraging kids to participate in as many different things as they can, just to expand their horizons. For their own independence, once they get to the third grade, they want to have a choice; I can go to the gym or I can do Nintendo, or I can do an art thing, or I can go to Girl Scouts."

The Boys and Girls Club of Orange is monitored and mentored by the

Charlottesville chapter, who in turn is answerable to a national headquarters in Atlanta. Besides providing written material on how to implement programs, the national organization is pretty much hands-off, allowing the local chapters to run themselves. Their only requirement is that individual chapters conduct activities involving five key focus areas: Character and Leadership Development; Education and Career Development; Health and Life Skills; The Arts; and Sports, Fitness and Recreation.

So, it's more than just Power Hour followed by shooting baskets in the gym. Arts are encouraged with the help of the Arts Center in Orange. Under the Health and Life Skills focus area, there's a program called Smart Choices for adolescent girls. The boys' counterpart is called Passport to Manhood. Many of these programs are sponsored and funded by private foundations and public corporations.

And then there are the volunteers. Orange Town Attorney Gail Marshall, along with Susan Poole and Jennie Gibson, help with the Torch Club, which falls under the Character and Leadership Development focus area. Today, Gail is casting and rehearsing a holiday play called Randy the Red-Horned Rainmoose, that will be performed by adolescents for the little kids. The fact that Gail is wearing a snug stop-you-in-your tracks leopard print dress with a wide black belt, does not go unnoticed by this bevy of teenage girls and one lucky boy. "This white haired lady is pretty cool," they seem to say.

Then there is the man who Sheila Donnelly

terms "the volunteer extraordinaire," Brandon Bienvenu. His last name means "welcome" in French, and he lives up to it. He is living testimony that this chapter is indeed quite remarkable. He used to volunteer at the Boys and Girls Club in Charlottesville, but now he travels here three times per week to help kids with their homework. "They've got a good group here," he says, putting his hand on Connor Fenwick's shoulder. "If it wasn't for guys like this I wouldn't do this."

Soon, Brandon and the BGC will test drive a new program that

he has hatched. It will touch on all five of the key areas. "Developing all areas...instead of just focusing on academics or athletics, really breaking into multiple categories... the arts, developing their creative side....beyond that, teaching teamwork, cooperation and life skills....We're going to divide the kids into multiple teams, each staffer is going to coach a team, and in the end they're going to compete in these various disciplines."

For the record, the Boys and Girls Club of Orange gives kids a place to go and things to do from 2:30 in the afternoon until 6:00 in the evening, when their parents come and pick them up. A bus brings kids from



Photo by Phil Audibert

And it's not all work at Boys and Girls Club; there's time to play too. Mathew Barnes (left) and Bobby Lee launch naval attacks against each other. Other kids are allowed to play Nintendo.

A kid can spend as much as 1,100 hours here, more time than he spends in school. Demographically, almost 40 percent are minorities, 45 percent come from single-parent families, and 62 percent are enrolled in the free and reduced cost lunch program at school.

Sheila Donnelly is the only full-time employee, but she is quick to credit her staff of seven part-timers and her volunteers, without whom she would be paralyzed. On this day, she has just returned from Charlottesville with a mini-van-load of donated office supplies from Staples. Some of the older kids don't have to be asked twice to help unload her car.

"Lots of single-parent families, a lot of parents who are trying to work two jobs, to keep their heads above water," answers Sheila when asked the question, so, what kind of kid joins Boys and Girls Club?

BGC Board President, Mary Lew Sponski joins the conversation. "It is really open to anybody economically, socially, religiously," she says, adding that there are some who could afford to pay for after-school enrichment several times over, but they send their kids here, simply because their kids prefer it.

Still the focus is on what the mission statement identifies as "those from disadvantaged circumstances." And those disadvantaged circumstances are not just economic in nature.

Regrettably, in this day and time of predators, both live and cyber, some kids may be put in



Photo by Phil Audibert

Sports, Fitness and Recreation is another focus area of Boys and Girls Club. Here, Troy Johnson hits nothing but net as L.B. Williams looks on. Both high schoolers find themselves cast as mentors and role models to younger kids, and L.B.'s father, Benny, is a part time staffer.



Photo by Phil Audibert

Boys and Girls Club Board President Mary Lou Sponski heaps office supplies donated by Staples on a table, as club member Cortez Williams brings in another armload. At \$50 dues per member per year, Boys and Girls Club must rely on fundraising and contributions such as this to make ends meet.

Just like everything, it costs money

You're not going to believe what the dues are to join Boys and Girls Club...\$50... for a whole year. Now, look at their budget: \$281,000. Something is not adding up here.

"That's a lot of money and it has to be raised year after year after year," shudders BGC President Mary Lew Sponski. "We are totally responsible for raising all of the money to run this unit. It's a huge job."

Nowadays she has some help. A look at the names on the board of directors reads like a Who's Who of heavy hitters for Orange County charities and fundraising appeals. Recent appointee, Lou Thompson, who comes from an impressive public relations and investment counseling background, says, "by reputation this is a good organization to be a part of." Mary Lew Sponski adds "We are trying to make it the board of choice; the board that people want to join."

It wasn't always that way. Eight years ago, Patricia Hennessy, the wife of the Rev. Scott Hennessy of St. Thomas Episcopal Church, became alarmed at the number of school children aimlessly wandering around town during after school hours...latchkey kids who weren't coming home to do their homework. Some were courting trouble on the street. It took her two years, but Patricia managed to prove to Charlottesville and BGC's Atlanta headquarters that they could make a Boys and Girls Club in Orange fly.

According to Mary Lew Sponski, Patricia involved everyone having a connection with children: social services, the police department, the sheriff's office, the office on youth, to name just a few. The first board was made up of "people who were directly involved with children."

And it still is; it's just that some of the newer board members are talented shakers and movers, who know how to raise money. Charlie and Mary Lou Seilheimer have hosted numerous galas atop Mount Sharon. Luca Paschina of Barbourville Vineyards, "a huge supporter," has organized the Four-Chef dinners at Palladio Restaurant. Next year, the gala will be held at Bending River Farm owned by Mike and Betty Long.

But events such as these cost money as well as make it. There are tents to rent and caterers to hire and food and drink to buy. Recently, board member R.T. Whitman came up with an idea to find, what Lou Thompson calls, "investors in the Boys and Girls Club."

Here's how it works: It costs about \$4 per day for one child to go to Boys and Girls Club year round. That's about \$1,440 per year. What if we line up people willing to pay the annual cost for one child for one whole year? A letter will go out soon seeking 200 of these potential "investors." If it works, and it probably will, then the gala events can be used to build an endowment or perhaps...a new building fund.