

# The Best of the Best:

## In Their Own Words

### Ambrosia Hafen-Hayes, Pacific Region

When Ambrosia Hafen-Hayes was just 11 years old, her grandparents had to rescue her and her sister from a children's shelter after their mother abandoned them. Although Ambrosia later returned to her mother's care, she had to assume the role of a parent when her mother was diagnosed with brain seizures.

Ambrosia says the one positive constant in her life has been the North Las Vegas Boys & Girls Club, where she has been involved in numerous leadership activities, including service as president of the Keystone Club. She also works as an assistant at the Club.

A senior in high school, Ambrosia, 17, maintains A's and B's and takes honors classes through a special magnet program. Her community service includes teaching Sunday school and volunteering for the Ronald McDonald House. She plans to attend the University of Nevada at Las Vegas to obtain a degree in social work or medicine.

"I have been a member of the North Las Vegas Boys & Girls Club for 11 years. I have grown up there. The staff is my family and I have many friends at the Club. The Club means a lot to me. It has been my sanctuary and my salvation, helping me through very difficult times.

"Even though I was constantly moving from home to home, I was always taken to the Boys & Girls Club. Through all the changes, the Club was my only stability. I had found a safe haven.

The staff had confidence in me and always encouraged me to be the best.

"We all have choices, but with those choices come consequences. I choose to look forward and not look back. I choose to succeed. Thank you, Boys & Girls Club."

### Yamarie Negrón, Northeast Region

A four-year member of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Northern Westchester in New York, Yamarie Negrón is determined to make a difference. The product of a single-parent home, Yamarie cared for her sisters while their mother worked the night shift. She even got a job herself so she could help with the bills – all while maintaining a strong academic record in high school.

During her four years at the Club, Yamarie, now 18, served as a leader for younger members, participated in community service projects, and organized a youth symposium on domestic violence, which received an award from the Colgate Foundation.

Yamarie, who spoke only Spanish when she entered the first grade, is sensitive to the challenges facing many new immigrants, and volunteers her time with an after-school bilingual program. Now a freshman at Manhattanville College in Purchase, New York, Yamarie plans to become a child psychologist so she can help troubled teens.

"Participating at the Club and in its activities has impacted me in a remarkable way. My decision to become a member of the Boys & Girls Club was one of the most sound and intelligent choices I have ever made.

"Although I was always a well-mannered and educated child, growing up in the slums of Bridgeport, Connecticut, pressured me to become extremely short-tempered. At times you could have considered me selfish and self-centered, but the Boys & Girls Club has changed all that.

"My involvement with the Club not only became my second life; it also became my second home. A home where it is okay to be a kid and let go of adult-like responsibilities. Without the Boys & Girls Club staff and their guidance, I would not be where I am today."



## Kewanna Daniels, Southeast Region

**Eighteen-year-old Kewanna Daniels attributes her inspiration to succeed to the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Gulf Coast in Mississippi.**

**After watching her two brothers succumb to their gang- and drug-infested neighborhood, Kewanna vowed to work hard to be different. Fortunately, she found the support she sought at her Boys & Girls Club. A 12-year member of the Club, she tutored younger members, was a soloist in the youth choir and was employed as a junior staff member.**

**In high school, Kewanna maintained a 3.5 grade point average, served on the student council and was voted vice president of the entire student body. An active member of her community, Kewanna has volunteered at an annual beach clean-up and in local nursing homes, and trained to be a peer counselor through the South Mississippi AIDS Task Force. She is currently a freshman at Tougaloo College in Mississippi.**

*"As a child growing up, I 'lived' at the Boys & Girls Club. Because of this, my Club has become my family. There is always someone to speak with or a shoulder to lean on.*

*"Working as a junior staff member, I understand that it is difficult to inspire all children. It takes love in your heart, dedication and commitment to work at the Club. I find inspiration at my Club. For this reason, I will forever be thankful for the same love, dedication and commitment shown toward me.*

*"I have been a member of my Club for 12 years and each year comes with greater expectations. Those expectations have taught me how to conduct myself as a young lady, lead others and carry myself in a professional manner. I incorporate these concepts daily to become a more productive, responsible and caring individual."*



## Luis Vasquez, Southwest Region

**When Luis Vasquez moved from Mexico to the United States at age 9, learning English was just the first of his big challenges. Living in a neighborhood overrun by gangs, violence and drugs, Luis found a loving community at the Boys & Girls Clubs of Weld County in Colorado.**

**A nine-year Club member, Luis tutored younger members, participated in community service projects such as graffiti clean-up and roadside litter control, and helped staff communicate with Spanish-speaking Club members and parents.**

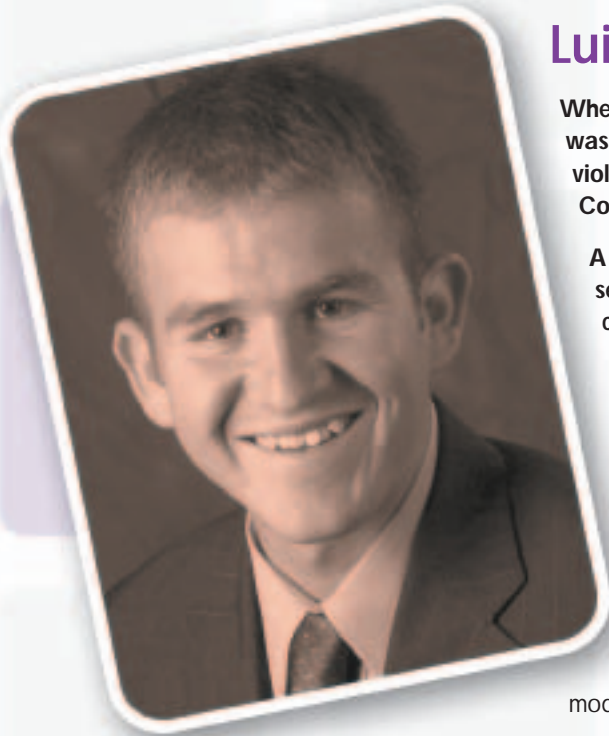
**Luis excelled in high school, both in the classroom and on the soccer field. The only Hispanic member of the soccer team until his senior year, Luis' influence helped recruit other Hispanic players. He is also a member of the LULAC Club, a nationwide program that connects Latino students from across the county.**

**Now 18, Luis is a freshman at the University of Northern Colorado and plans to become a bilingual teacher to help non-English-speaking immigrant children, just like he once was.**

*"The Club has meant the world to me. Being a part of the Club has given me the opportunity to stay away from gangs, stay in school and become a role model for my family.*

*"After I began attending the Club almost every day, I realized that my sisters were looking up to me and that felt good. I felt good. Even my parents were looking at me in a different light. When you come from a family where hope is sometimes hard to find, I became that hope.*

*"Without the Boys & Girls Club, I probably would have chosen the wrong road. To me, the Club means options and choices; it means giving me the chance to live my life the way I want, rather than how I am forced to."*



# And the Winner is...

Following a moving and intense competition, Mieasha Hicks, a 10-year member of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Toledo in Ohio, was named Boys & Girls Clubs of America's National Youth of the Year at the Congressional Breakfast in Washington, D.C., on Sept. 17.

Co-hosted by Senator Orrin Hatch and Representative Steny Hoyer, this year's Congressional Breakfast attracted more than 400 people, including lawmakers from both sides of the aisle and other influential members of the D.C. community.

Special guests included Senator Patrick Leahy; Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony Principi; Mississippi Attorney General Mike Moore; former Baltimore Oriole Billy Ripken; and Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps. The morning's highlight was the announcement of the new National Youth of the Year by Melvin Laird, senior counselor for Reader's Digest and former secretary of defense.

Judges for the competition were: Jean Case, The Case Foundation; Michael Lewellen, BET-TV; Brian Stafford, former head of the U.S. Secret Service; Greg Toppo, **USA Today**; and Rasheen Coleman, BGCA's 1996 National Youth of the Year.



## Mieasha Hicks, Midwest Region

**The one word that describes Mieasha Hicks best is "survivor." Born to parents who were children themselves (13 and 15), Mieasha was forced to grow up quickly. Her mother left the state when Mieasha was just 11, and her father died the following year. Raised by her grandmother and aunts, Mieasha focused much of her energy on caring for her six younger siblings. Because of her influence, all of her siblings are now honor students.**

**Fortunately, Mieasha found much-needed support at the Boys & Girls Clubs of Toledo. A 10-year member, her many accomplishments include service as vice president of the Keystone Club and assisting younger children through the homework help program. Mieasha was also an academic standout in high school, where she was a member of the National Honor Society, the student council and the African-American Cultural Club.**

**Mieasha, now 18, is a freshman at Bowling Green University in Ohio, where she will study medicine and science.**

"The Boys & Girls Clubs of Toledo means to me what it means to a lot of Club members across the country. It's a place where I go to feel comfortable, where I can have an impact on other people's lives and they can impact mine.

"When I think about the negative alternatives, I'm glad I chose to spend my free time at the Club. Many of my peers have made bad choices, and I feel that I have a definite advantage.

"I've also learned how to become more 'social' and interact with others. I have met many people at the Club who have become lifelong friends.

"The Club has helped me develop into the positive, upbeat, goal-oriented person that I am. It truly has been my home away from home. I will be forever grateful for my experience there."



# Thank you, Reader's Digest Foundation!

For the last five decades, the Reader's Digest Foundation has generously sponsored the Youth of the Year initiative, making it the premier recognition program for Boys & Girls Club members.

Thanks to the foundation, hundreds of hardworking and deserving young people have received the encouragement they needed to make the successful transition to adulthood. Boys & Girls Clubs of America is grateful to the Reader's Digest Foundation for its continuing commitment to improve the future for our nation's disadvantaged youth.

## Youth of the Year Program

The Youth of the Year program brings hope and opportunity to extraordinary young people who have overcome enormous odds. It is a comprehensive, nationwide initiative that promotes and celebrates Boys & Girls Club members' service to Club, community and family; academic performance; spiritual values; and life goals, as well as poise and public speaking ability.

Each year, a series of competitions on the local, state and regional levels produces finalists from each of BGCA's five regions. These winners gather in Washington, D.C., to compete for the coveted honor of National Youth of the Year. Following interviews with an elite panel of judges, the National Youth of the Year is announced at a prestigious Congressional Breakfast. The winner is then installed by the President of the United States, and spends the next year traveling across the country as a representative of and spokesperson for Boys & Girls Clubs of America.



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Because of her gift, approximately \$532 of her income is considered tax-free income. Also, because of her gift, she receives an immediate charitable tax deduction of \$4,627.

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To receive more information about how a gift annuity works and a confidential, no obligation illustration on how this type of gift can benefit you, please fill out and **mail this form to:**

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**Note.** We always urge our friends to consult with their own qualified advisor before making a final decision to proceed with any planned gift involving Boys & Girls Clubs of America.

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# Our Holiday Gift to You

During this season of giving, we decided that the best present we could give to you, our friends and donors, was proof of the positive impact that your support of Boys & Girls Clubs of America has on our nation's young people.

There's no doubt that many kids today are faced with extremely challenging circumstances. Issues such as poverty, declining public schools, violence and drugs make it difficult for them to find the right path in life, and learn how to become a good and honorable person.

That's what Boys & Girls Clubs are all about. Clubs help young people find that right path, and give them the tools and guidance they need to reach their full potential.

This issue of **The Positive Place** features five outstanding young Americans who have made the right choices on their way to successful and productive adulthood. These young people are the regional winners of our annual National Youth of the Year competition, and they represent the "best of the best" that Boys & Girls Clubs have to offer.

As you read their stories, we hope you'll recognize your role in shaping these young lives. Without the support of caring, compassionate people like you, they would not have had the



resources or opportunities to help them overcome tremendous obstacles and achieve success in life.

On behalf of Mieasha, Kewanna, Luis, Ambrosia, Yamarie and the 3.6 million other youth served by Boys & Girls Clubs this year, thank you for your generosity and support.

*Happy holidays from your friends at  
Boys & Girls Clubs of America!*



## BGCA'S MISSION

To inspire and enable all young people,  
especially those from disadvantaged  
circumstances, to realize their full potential  
as productive, responsible and caring citizens.

Boys & Girls Clubs of America comprises a national network  
of more than 3,300 neighborhood-based facilities,  
serving some 3.6 million young people annually.

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