

Boys & Girls Club's Michael Johnson Youth/Community Focus

By Jonathan Gramling

When I enter the Boys & Girls Club on Taft Street, there stood Michael Johnson, the club's new CEO, surrounded by children. Johnson is a big man with a commanding, yet gentle presence. While many of the kids whom he is charged with helping to prepare them educationally and socially for their futures come from rough backgrounds, in Madison, Wisconsin, few grew up in an environment as rough as Johnson did.

Johnson grew up in the projects of Chicago, Illinois, having lived in the infamous Cabrini Green projects and the ABLA Homes. "I am what a lot of these kids are," Johnson said. "I come from the same sort of background, the same sort of community. Maybe my neighborhood was probably a little bit more challenging than the environment that some of our kids go through. But I grew up in a neighborhood that was infested with gangs and prostitution. I am a Boys & Girls Club kid. I grew up in community centers, grew up going to a Boys & Girls Club."

Johnson had the opportunity to go back home and speak at his old elementary school. Of the 23 young men Johnson went to school with, only four are still living. Life was tough in those Chicago streets, but Johnson had a solid family behind him and a lot of personal and institutional support to survive those streets and succeed.

"I had this little Greek guy who owned a liquor store in my neighborhood and he was real big on education and he became my mentor," Johnson said. "I was connected to a faith-based organization. There was a community center in my neighborhood center too. There were the Boys & Girls Clubs and the YMCA. If there had not been a Boys & Girls Club or community center in my neighborhood, I think I wouldn't even be alive."

Johnson escaped those streets and went on to get a B.A. in business education from Chicago State University and a Master's in global management from the University of Phoenix. He worked his way up through various positions and organizations in Chicago and St. Louis and ended up as the Deputy Recreation Commissioner for the City of Philadelphia, managing 163 recreations centers, 74 swimming pools, 240 athletic fields and 74 community parks.

One would think that running a relatively small Boys & Girls Club would be a step down in Johnson's career, but it's what he wanted all along. "If you google me, you will always find me talking about running a Boys & Girls Club organization," Johnson said. "I think that at the end of the day, whatever your profession is, you have to be excited about it. I don't want to wake up every day and be miserable coming to work. For me, this is like ministry. This is like I was put here for a reason to do something. Life is too short to be



*Boys & Girls Club Executive Director Michael Johnson
with some members of the club's The Youth Journal*

upset, to be mad. I want to come here and have fun. There are going to be days when I am going to have challenges here. But you have to have an upbeat attitude. Part of it is my personality and part of it is I know this type of work saved my life. Part of it is you have to be out there because you have to think big to get people to follow. And at the end of the day, people want to see results.”

Johnson is committed to making the Boys & Girls Club a youth development club and a neighborhood center that is accessed by young people, seniors and everyone in between. Within his first weeks as the CEO, Johnson could be seen outreaching to the Urban League, Centro Hispano and other institutions in South Madison because he knows they all have to work together for the good of the children.

“When you think about just protecting your own turf, you die,” Johnson said. “I’ve been here a month. We’re connecting to Centro Hispano. I think there are some opportunities for us to partner with them on some projects. You look at the work that we are doing in the schools, you talk about education, the reality is that we’re not investing in our kids’ education and teaching these kids how to read and closing the academic achievement gap of those families that need us the most, we’re doing a disservice to the kids in this community. If we’re going to do that well, we have to partner with the schools. We have to partner with organizations like Centro Hispano and the Urban League. We have partnerships with them right now.”

With Johnson’s approach, the Boys & Girls Club will become a vibrant part of South Madison. The children will be in good hands.

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