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Michael Johnson transforms the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County

Mary Ellen Bell on Thursday 07/25/2013



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As the CEO of the [Boys & Girls Club of Dane County](#), Michael Johnson feels he's paying back to an organization he says probably saved his life when he was a kid growing up in the projects in Chicago.

"A lot of kids I grew up with are either dead or in prison. They got shot or stabbed or they got into drugs and crime," Johnson says, noting that someone he knew growing up had recently been thrown from a seventh-floor window.

"I grew up in a very bad neighborhood, with a lot of crime, drugs and prostitution, but really I lived at the Boys & Girls Club," he says. "It was my sanctuary. I didn't have to worry about being shot or stabbed when I was there. And I was there every day. They had to kick me out when they closed at night."

Johnson knows he was lucky to have found a safe place to go after school, but he believes poor kids need more than somewhere to hang out. They need to get a good education, graduate from high school and go on to college, and they need help to make that happen. He himself graduated from high school virtually illiterate. Now 37, he struggled as a young adult to learn to read and write at a Chicago community college. He went on to earn a bachelor's degree and an MBA.

Johnson is proof that education makes all the difference in how a poor child's life turns out. His childhood experiences could have led to an early and brutal end. Instead, he runs a major nonprofit organization, lives in a nice house in Fitchburg with his wife and two children, and is emerging as one of Madison's most active and charismatic community leaders.

In the three years he has helmed the Boys & Girls Club here, Johnson has spearheaded a renovation of what had become a rather shabby facility on Taft Street in South Madison, enhanced programs at a second facility in the Allied Drive-Dunn's Marsh neighborhood, and secured new partnerships with dozens of businesses, organizations and schools. He has also created a program focused on visual and performing arts and beefed up after-school tutoring programs.

Now Johnson has an even grander plan. Last winter, the club launched a fundraising effort with a target of \$15 million to expand tutoring and mentoring programs in public schools, triple the number of kids involved in these programs and increase high school graduation rates of kids who participate in Boys & Girls Club programs to 90%.

And he intends to get this done by 2018.

Advocate for achievement

Johnson has complete faith that he can do it. Already, in just a few months, he and his board of directors have raised \$2.3 million.





"We are not raising money for bricks and mortar," Johnson says. "We don't need a new building. We need this money for programs to make sure our children succeed."

This project represents a shift in focus for the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County. Since 1999, it has provided after-school recreation programs, served daily free meals, and given kids a respite from less-than-stable homes. Through partnerships with high schools in Madison and Verona, the club has supported [AVID](#) (Advancement Via Individual

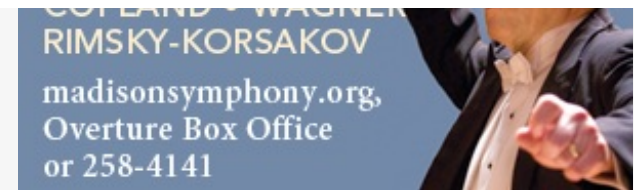
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Determination) programs and the club's own **TOPS** (Teens of Promise) project. With funds currently being raised, the club will place even more emphasis on academics, encouraging youth to succeed in school and in life.

AVID is a school-based program offered nationwide that promotes the ambition to get a college education among students whose parents may not have had that much education. It is currently offered in high schools in Madison and Verona. TOPS, a Boys & Girls Club of Dane County program, provides tutoring, internships and college visits. It has 47 paid tutors and seven full-time staff.

The funds that Boys & Girls Club raises will go to hire more staff and tutors so more high school students can participate.

It's a plan that initially drew **criticism** from Kaleem Caire, president of the Urban League of Greater Madison, who cautioned that the Boys & Girls Club should not deviate from its traditional mission of providing recreational activities for youth.

Johnson says recreation will continue to be an essential part of the club's mission. "But we are concerned that kids do more than shoot pool and play basketball," he says. "What good is that if they can't read and write?"

"We know the AVID-TOPS approach works," Johnson says, citing a University of Wisconsin **assessment of AVID** released earlier this year. The research found that AVID students got better grades, had better attendance, and had fewer behavior problems than their peers.

Mary Kelley, the principal at Madison East High School, where for-credit AVID classes have been offered for seven years, is excited by what the programs are accomplishing and happy to have Johnson's backing.

"He's a big advocate for achievement," she says. "He comes to speak to the students and they love him. He comes to our fundraisers and believes in our teachers. He is very inspiring to our young people. There's nothing he won't do for kids."

A 'help wanted' sign changes a life

Johnson's commitment to helping poor and underprivileged kids is rooted in his own childhood.

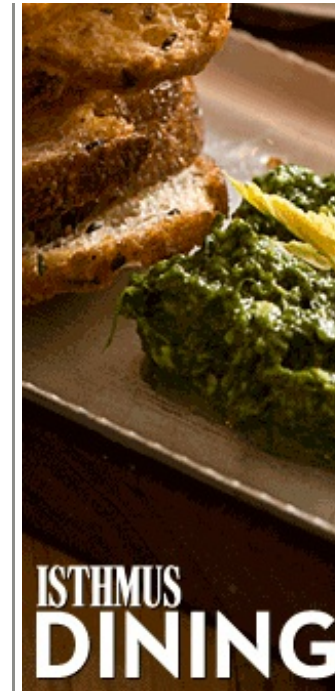
"I was one of these kids," he says.

Johnson's single mother, who died in 1998, raised him and four siblings in desperate poverty in a three-room apartment in one of Chicago's most dangerous neighborhoods, the notorious ABLA Projects. He had very little contact with his father and estimates he has 23 half-siblings, some of whom he has met. As with many kids growing up in this kind of environment, schoolwork took a back seat to grittier concerns like avoiding being in the line of fire when guns went off, dodging the drug dealers and finding enough to eat. His mother did the best she could.

"My mother was one of the strongest women I've ever known and a force to be reckoned with," Johnson says. "She didn't have a lot, but she cared a lot. She made sure we had decent clothes, and the apartment was always clean and nice. It was a haven from the neighborhood." He says she taught her kids to be respectful, took them to church, and had high expectations about their behavior.

When Johnson was about 12, he met the man who would inspire him to make something better out of his life, Pete Cochis.

Cochis, a Greek American, ran a grocery store across the street from the projects. One day, Johnson noticed a "help



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wanted" sign in the store window.

"We were out of money and food. I was a big kid, and I thought I needed to be a man and help my mother by earning some money," Johnson says. He went home, put on the white suit his mother bought him for church, and borrowed a suitcase that looked a little like an attaché case.

"I went back to the store and told Pete I wanted the job. Pete took one look at me and just couldn't stop laughing. He thought it was amazing that a kid from that neighborhood would put on a suit to apply for a job as a stock boy."

Johnson got the job.

After he had been working in the store for a brief time, Cochis caught him and some other boys stealing food.

"He didn't need to steal," Cochis says about the incident. "If he was hungry, I would have given him the food."

Johnson stopped coming to work after this confrontation. Cochis noticed that when the boy came out of the projects to go to another store, he would always cross the street and walk a half block out of his way to avoid Cochis and the scene of his crime.

"That went on for days," Cochis recalls. "One day, I went out and caught up with him and asked him why he was doing that. He said, 'I'm ashamed to come by you because I stole something.' And he started crying.

"At that point I knew he was a good kid. He could feel his guilt. Most of those kids would just shrug it off. I told him that it's not like he took a ring or a watch. He took food because he was hungry." Cochis took Johnson back as his stock boy.

"It turned him around," Cochis says. "By the time he was 14 or 15, he was running the store, running the cash register, counting the money and everything."

Cochis became more than just a boss. He became a mentor and a surrogate father. The two are still good friends.

Cochis says he invited Johnson to come to his house in suburban Glenview on weekends and for entire summers. That people lived in nice houses, where it was quiet and safe, was a revelation to the boy, a glimpse into a life he'd never seen. Cochis encouraged Johnson to get better grades, gave him a few dollars for every A on his report card and bought him a bicycle.

"I knew he cared about me," Johnson says. "And he kept me out of trouble."

Dream job

Johnson may have been getting a few A's, but he wasn't getting much of an education.

The product of social promotion, he graduated from high school barely able to read and write. But he could play football, and the University of Minnesota offered him a scholarship to play for the Gophers. He lasted only three semesters before he flunked out and returned to Chicago.

"I felt I'd failed. I'd gone off to this big school, but here I was back in the projects. I knew I had to do something, and I knew I had to learn to read and write so I could get an education," he says.

So he started to take remedial classes at night at [Malcom X College](#) and got a job at a Boys & Girls Club during the day. He started dreaming of one day becoming the CEO for a Boys & Girls Club. It took several years, but Johnson

succeeded. He got his literacy skills up to snuff and went on to earn a bachelor's degree in business education at Chicago State University and an MBA from the University of Phoenix.

Johnson spent 15 years in executive-level positions for the city of Philadelphia Recreation Department, the YMCA in St. Louis and public schools in Chicago and Philadelphia before landing his dream job at the Boys & Girls Club in Madison three years ago.

Chris Fortune, a member of the club's board of directors for seven years and its president for the last six months, describes Johnson's leadership style as inspirational and charismatic.

"He is able to speak from years of experience with the environment we are trying to reach. He is very articulate and knows what is needed. He does a good job bringing people together," Fortune says.

Fortune got involved when his company, Saris Cycling Group, became a major donor, helping to get the Allied Drive facility up and running in 2006.

Johnson has been widely recognized as an innovative advocate for children. The *Wisconsin State Journal* named him one of Five People to Watch in 2013. The Boys & Girls Clubs of America selected him as Midwest Executive of the Year in 2012. His organization was selected as one of the top five in the nation by Boys & Girls Clubs of America and the Charles Schwab Foundation for its financial literacy programs for kids. Other honors have come from the University of Phoenix, the U.S Department of Education and the Pennsylvania legislature.

His seemingly endless drive to help others doesn't stop at the door to the Boys & Girls Club. Just days after the devastating tornadoes in Oklahoma, he pulled a group of some 20 volunteers and collected \$20,000 to take food and other supplies donated by Metcalfe's Market in trucks provided by Smart Motors.

When he's not working, Johnson says he enjoys spending time with his wife, Toya Johnson, who is director of community impact for United Way, and their children. He started cycling this summer and pounds out about 100 miles a week, rising at 4:30 a.m. to meet up with cycling buddy Tim Metcalfe, owner of Metcalfe's Market.

"I've lost 25 pounds since I started doing this," he notes.

Johnson also enjoys playing basketball and softball. He's a movie buff and admits to setting an alarm clock to catch the first showing of *Man of Steel* when it opened at midnight June 13.

Life skills

On a Thursday afternoon, the day before the end of the school year, the Taft Street club building was buzzing with kids. Two hundred or more come every day. Johnson, wearing dress pants and a bright blue T-shirt emblazoned with the club motto, "Great Futures Start Here," introduced me to James Blilie, 15, his sister Rikayla, 9, and 14-year-old twins Francisca and Jovan Hawkins. All four say they enjoy hanging out with friends there, but they also take advantage of the opportunity to get their homework done. All say they are doing well in school.

And James and Rikayla are also getting a head start on planning their futures. They're saving money in their own accounts at Star Credit Union, the only certified credit union in the country for Boys & Girls Club members.

"James came home one day and told me he'd opened a bank account," says his mother, Rita Blilie. "I was so surprised."

Located in the Taft Street building, the credit union is the real deal, complete with a teller, Kristel Renn, and a genuine

bulletproof bank window provided by Summit Credit Union, which partnered with the club to get Star Credit Union up and running. Kids can open an account with as little as 25 cents. They can save up to a limit of \$500 in these accounts.

When James maxed out his account, he enrolled in the Investment Club to learn about stocks. He now owns shares in Madison Gas and Electric. He has even attended two shareholders' meetings. What's he saving his money for?

"College," he says decisively. "Or a car. Or both."

Rikayla is inching up on the deposit limit. What would she like to do with the money?

"I want to buy a computer like James did," she replies.

Jovan and Francisca were a bit shy and were tired from a trip to the Goodman Pool after school let out, but they both say they have a good time at the Boys & Girls Club. Their father, Frank Hawkins, is more forthcoming. He says the Club has been a big help for his family.

Hawkins, who has been a stay-at-home single dad, explains that he got into financial trouble last fall. He is not working because Jovan is on dialysis, and his treatments mean regular trips to the doctor. Jovan's medical bills ate up the money needed to purchase fuel oil for the winter. And the family needed a new washer.

"The Boys & Girls Club really helped us negotiate with MG&E and helped us get a washing machine," Hawkins says.

Johnson says this kind of help is not the main mission of the Boys & Girls Club.

"It's not what we normally do, but to help these kids, we have to help the whole family," he says.

One of a kind

Johnson also introduced me to Daniel Yancy, 18, who will enter Edgewood College in the fall. Since eighth grade, Daniel has made the 45-minute bus trip from his home on the west side to La Follette High School so he can participate in the AVID program there.

"I wanted to participate so I could get organized and prepped for college," Daniel explains. "It's important to have the mindset that graduating is important but that college is the next step." Daniel is spending the summer break working as a volunteer coordinator assistant at the club.

The cheerful Taft Street building, extensively renovated since Johnson arrived, includes spaces for getting homework done with the help of professional tutors, a game room and a gymnasium. The newest renovation is dedicated to the arts, with studios for dance, music and visual arts. The computer lab contains 20 brand-new computers donated by Meicher & Associates. A state-of-the-art recording studio features computerized keyboards, donated by J.H. Findorff & Son for composing. The kids, with some help from professionals, recently used these facilities to create a video, which was screened for an audience of 1,500 in May at the Overture Center and is being shown in schools.

The Boys & Girls Club currently serves about 3,000 young people with a full- and part-time staff of 130 and about 500 volunteers. If Johnson reaches his goal, the club will be able to help 10,000 kids. Will they do it?

"I'm completely confident we will," Johnson says. "We have a great community and we have great support from that community."

It's hard to doubt that kind of confidence. As Cochis says, "In a nutshell, Michael is one of a kind."

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