

The Boys & Girls Club of East Aurora:

Memberships and Memories That Last a Lifetime

by Rick Ohler
Columnist

If you're a kid between the ages of seven and high school graduation, or if you have school-age children or grandchildren, or if you were yourself a kid once upon a time, you should stop into the Boys & Girls Club of East Aurora some afternoon. You'll see a hubbub of animated, supervised, joyful, organized chaos with all manner of programs in progress simultaneously. You'll also see why the East Aurora club sits near the top of Boys & Girls Clubs of America, and you'll get why other clubs across the nation often look to East Aurora for guidance.

and what attracts those three hundred-plus kids is the staff. And the volunteers. And the dedicated board members who are both behind the scenes and very much in evidence. Each staff member and volunteer is professional and trained, but it is the love and care they offer the members that shine brightly; you can feel it whether they're running a floor hockey or basketball game, supervising a craft project, teaching cooking, giving music lessons, operating the snack bar, moderating a peer group meeting, tutoring during a Power Hour homework session, overseeing the non-stop activity in the games room, putting dancers through their steps or simply lending a sympathetic ear to a young person who needs someone

community has recognized its value, generously supporting it, especially when the United Way of Buffalo and Erie County discontinued funding a few years back. The financial support that comes from the community, whether it's direct donations or special events like golf tournaments and raffles, is never taken for granted; that's why executive director Gary Schutrum makes the standing invitation to see the place in action as his costs increase and the club's services are ever more critical for the community's youth.

Short of visiting the club for a tour (which they would love you to do, anytime, announced or otherwise), one of the best ways to understand the value of the club to our community is to look at their stationery, or today's equivalent of stationery, the "Staff and Board of Directors" page of their website, bgcea.org/board--staff.html. The names you see read like a who's who of locals.

At the top of the staff list, you'll find Schutrum, executive director since 1987, self-described Club Rat during the 1970s and an East Aurora High School alumnus from the class of 1978. Next is the unit director, Neil Parrish, who graduated from EAHS in 1990 and has been involved with the club for 46 of his 52 years. Then teen director, Gavin Griffin, class of 2013; Carlie Thompson, girls programming director, class of '21; Rose Warner, school-age teacher, class of '81. A quick sampler of the board of directors reveals president Mike Wymer, EAHS '79; vice-president Matt Romagnuolo, Iroquois 1989; treasurer Jim Dusel, '73; secretary Marnie Smith-Uebelhoer, 2002; past president Jen Fee, '90 and Mike Sawicki, the senior board member from the class of 1964. (Full disclosure, I was a Club Rat who joined in 1958 and spent many an hour there.)

The point, of course, is that commitment to the Boys & Girls Club of their youth remains strong regardless of their age. The loyalty persists whether they have their own kids or grandkids now attending after school or whether their families have long since aged out or moved away. Once my Boys & Girls Club, always my Boys & Girls Club—it's a special place, they will all tell you. Ask them why they stay involved as adults even if they live miles away and the answer will be a variation on this theme: to give back for everything the club did for me and to support the great work they do today. As Smith-Uebelhoer said, "I came to East Aurora at a difficult time, eighth grade, but the club quickly became my home. The connections, the peer mentoring friends I made at the club in middle school are still my best friends; they are the girls I'm going to celebrate my 40th birthday with in a few weeks."

Each might also say that while the club has maintained its purpose of caring for kids and giving them a place to be kids, it has also evolved to confront the realities of life in the 2020s.



Photo by Marty Wangelin

Members gather in the game room for some after school fun at the Boys & Girls Club of East Aurora on Paine Street.



Photo by Marty Wangelin

Cayla Simme carries Liahna Doll as they entertain themselves at the Boys & Girls Club of East Aurora on Paine Street.



Photo by Marty Wangelin

Neil Parrish, Unit Director of the Boys & Girls Club in East Aurora, with his son Lucas in Neil's office.

Street, first of all, is second to none—bright, safe, well-maintained, spacious enough to accommodate, on average, 323 kids a day. But what drives the place

to talk to. For 85 years, the club has been successful, "a godsend" as one parent told me, "the standard in the industry," said another. The



Photo by Marty Wangelin

Addison Bennett (left) and Hazel Case use a laptop in the computer room at the Boys & Girls Club of East Aurora on Paine Street.

"The beauty of our club," Schutrum said "is what it does for the whole child socially, physically, intellectually, academically. Studies of after-school programs show that kids belonging to a program like ours do better in school, 15 percent better. They make better choices, have less frequent trouble with law enforcement, delay sex, delay use of alcohol and drugs. Younger club kids will become the leaders of the high school. The former East Aurora High School principal told me that the leaders in his building—captains of sports teams, club leaders, student government officers—all had one thing in common, they came through the club from age seven through eighth grade."

"Our club is really unique among Boys & Girls Clubs," Smith-Uebelhoer said, who now has two of her own youngsters taking advantage of the club. "We've maintained the come-and-go-as-you-please option, where kids can show up after school and just hang out with their friends. But we also have so many opportunities. Some clubs are more like after-school programs, where everyone goes to a room and has the same activity. Not here. We have everything, and it's not just sports, although there is certainly plenty of that."

The East Aurora club offers its programs in six basic categories: character and leadership programming, educational programming, social recreation and games room, teen programming, athletics and the arts—

crafts, dance and music. Underlying all of those is a concern for the emotional and mental health of the members.

Teen director Griffin, who began coming to the club at age seven in 2002, joined Junior Staff in high school and now is a career youth worker with a master's degree in social work explains, "Kids are gravitating toward the social or group programs where they have the ability to be with a staff member. I run most of our character and leadership programs like Torch Club for seventh and eighth graders, Keystone Club for high schoolers, Smart Moves for younger middle schoolers. Carlie Thompson runs the girls-only Smart Girls program. I cater my programs to our kids; I meet them where they are in their development. It gives them an opportunity to gather with their peers, and have some real conversations about some tough topics. Once they establish that you are that person they can come to, they will come to you, whether it's me, my assistant Rob Ruffner or another staff person."

Another reality of the 2020s is the rising cost of excellence. In discussions I had with Schutrum, Wymer, Smith-Uebelhoer and Romagnuolo last week, they each expressed a similar message: The club is in great shape. Programs, staff, membership (1,250!), attendance, safety, supervision, Camp Ska-No-Ka-San are all working well. But to maintain the standards they have set will take continued and increased support from

the public or budget shortfalls are a real possibility.

"So much we've added to this place, especially the mental health aspects post-pandemic," Schutrum said. "We've added more professional staff who are trained in just about every aspect of childhood development. We're adding programs for high school kids that accommodate their busy schedules by having evening and weekend activities. We are involved in a program that teaches kids to be their own advocates and talk to government officials about the value of the club. It's expensive. We never turn anyone away for lack of money. We keep costs low for parents even as our costs rise. The physical plant here alone needs \$510,000 of repairs and maintenance in the next few years. The roof we put on one half of the building cost \$185,000. And then there were expenses at camp."

"Fundraising is an inevitable part of the club's existence, always will be, but I really want to get back to talking about what we do so well, helping the whole child, helping kids build relationships with staff. In the end," Schutrum said to me as we wrapped our talk "the club is about what you and I experienced growing up here: hanging with our friends, making new friends, playing games, playing sports, connecting with amazing staff and then coming back as adults to keep it going, each in our own way."

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