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TOP STORY SPOTLIGHT

## Gary Boys & Girls Club member wins local 2026 Youth of the Year Award

**Richard Requena**

Feb 27, 2026



Andrea delivers her speech as the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Northwest Indiana is celebrate their Youth of the Year.

John J. Watkins, The Times

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Richard Requena

**M**ERRILLVILLE — A panel of local leaders declared a Gary resident the 2026 the Youth of the Year Award winner for the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Northwest Indiana on Thursday.

Andrea, a member of the John Will Anderson Gary Club, was one of 16 finalists from Boys & Girls club centers in Lake and Porter counties. Andrea now heads to the state finals, one event short of the national stage for the Boys & Girls Club.



Andrea wins the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Northwest Indiana Youth of the Year Awards. With her are nominees Aubrey, Witten, JaMal, Samara and Keion.

John J. Watkins, The Times

The Boys and Girls Clubs asked reporters not to use the last names of club members due to safety and privacy concerns. Without pointing to specific club members, a spokesperson said that a higher percentage of club members live in foster homes than the general public.

Teens from Gary, Duneland, East Chicago, Lake Station and Portage chapters of Boys & Girls Club were represented at the Youth of the Year Awards, according to Boys & Girls Club of Greater NWI spokesperson Laura Weber.

Andrea was awarded a \$5,000 scholarship, with runner-up Samara of the Lake Station club earning a \$2,500 scholarship. All other contestants won a \$1,250 scholarship.



Andrea wins the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Northwest Indiana Youth of the Year Awards.

John J. Watkins, The Times

The finalists presented a speech on the impact of the club on their lives, and what they have learned during their time there. A group of panelists judged the youngsters not only on their speech, but also evaluations of their academic performances, extracurricular involvement and interviews.

Over 500 attendees were at the awards ceremony, a new record for the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Northwest Indiana.

This year's Youth of the Year panel of judges included Dakita Jones of Centier Bank, Dan Muldowney of Luke Family of Brands, Dr. Hector Marchand of Northwest Health, Joe Seymour of Boeing, Patrick O'Toole of Bank of America and Raeann Trakas of Cleveland Cliffs.

"Every time one of our candidates steps onto the stage, you see our mission come to life," shared Mike Jessen, President and CEO at Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Northwest Indiana.

"These six young leaders have turned challenges into triumphs, and their stories represent the thousands of youth we serve across the region. When we provide a platform for their voices, we are showing our community what the future of Northwest Indiana looks like. Their courage, ambition, and character are a testament to the life-changing impact of our clubs."

Previous winners of the local Youth of the Year award have performed well in the state finals. Former club member Marcus Steele of the John Will Anderson Gary Club won the local award in 2021, then won the Midwest Region award and was one of six finalists at the National Level. Steele now works at one of the clubs.

The organization serves 8,500 youth annually throughout Lake and Porter counties.

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