



**BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS
OF GREATER
NORTHWEST INDIANA**

Building Tomorrow's Leaders Today



Issue 6 • March 2026



Letter from the President

Our mission at Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Northwest Indiana is fueled by a simple, powerful belief: **every child deserves the chance to reach their full potential.** While rising costs have placed added pressures on our families and operations, our commitment has never been stronger. We are proud to be a vital partner for hardworking parents, providing affordable, caring supervision for youth afterschool while filling growing gaps in childcare. Children don't just spend their time at our Clubs, they find their spark.

The young people walking through our doors today are the future doctors, teachers, and leaders who will propel our community forward. Don't just take my word for it; check out Marina's story on the back page. Our Clubs serve as a bridge connecting home, school, and a world of opportunity. The results of your investment are truly inspiring; nationally, 78% of Club members report earning mostly A's and B's, and we see that same academic drive in every room of our Clubs each day. Here, the door is always open to a future that is limited only by a child's imagination.

At the heart of the Club experience is a profound sense of belonging and resilience. An incredible 91% of our teens say they have a trusted adult at the Club they can turn to, a figure nearly double the national average for support in schools. We are helping kids navigate a complex world with confidence, while fostering emotional intelligence and healthy habits. We aren't just providing a service; our mentors lift up our Club kids to ensure that no child has to face life's challenges alone.

Your support is more than a donation; it's a sound investment in the future of Northwest Indiana. Your generosity supports real, everyday needs and outcomes-driven programs that create lasting impact. As we look toward the bright futures of our members, I invite you to continue this journey with us, because we need you now more than ever. Together, we are opening doors, bridging gaps, and proving that when we invest in our kids, we are truly investing in a great future for us all.

With gratitude,

Mike

Mike Jessen, President & CEO

Youth of the Year Highlights



Youth of the Year was an unforgettable, inspirational evening with nearly 500 guests gathering to celebrate our six remarkable teen candidates. Our 2026 winner, Andrea from our John Will Anderson Gary Club, will move on to the State competition this April. Thanks to our generous supporters, every candidate received scholarship funds and a celebratory swag bag.

Seeing these future leaders share their stories of determination and resilience served as a powerful reminder of our youth's incredible potential. We are immensely proud of their hard work and the vision they have for our community.

We are grateful to all our supporters who made this empowering evening possible, including our Presenting Sponsors: Gurley Leep Automotive Family, M.E. Simpson Co., Inc., and Powers Health.

Championing Our Youth



We're thrilled to share that we have earned the Champion for Youth award from Boys & Girls Clubs of America! This honor is only given to the top 10%

of Clubs nationwide, and recognizes our team's advocacy for the issues that matter most to our community's kids.



The Region Needs **Club Kids. Club Kids** Need You.

2026 Board Updates



Paul Dawning

We're excited to welcome Paul Dawning as our new Board Chair! A board member since 2011 and local State Farm agent, Paul's leadership will help BGCGNWI continue to empower the next generation during his two-year term.



Rene Martin

We extend a huge thank you to Rene Martin for her service, heart, and energy as Board Chair over the past two years. Building on the foundation she established, our board is well-positioned to expand opportunities for families we serve. Rene now assumes the role of Immediate Past Chair.



Joe Stupka

Joe Stupka has been newly appointed to the board effective January 1, 2026. In his other role as Chief Retail Officer at Strack & Van Til, he's known for his collaborative leadership style. Joe was drawn to the organization by the positive difference the Clubs make in the lives of our region's kids.

Building a Legacy

We recently held our inaugural Legacy Builders Reception at Don Quijote Restaurante, where we celebrated 18 individuals who pledged annual gifts to sustain our Clubs for generations. To join as a founding Legacy Builder in 2026, email Denise Koebcke at dkoebcke@bgcgreaternwi.org.



Portage Renovation Update

Exciting renovations are underway at our Portage Club! This transformation features upgrades to the kitchen, cafeteria, and teen room and is made possible through our partnerships with the Gutenstein Heritage Foundation, Office Interiors, and Porter County Career & Technical Education. Our Club kids are even pitching in to help create a space they are proud to call their own, supported by generous donations from Kleckner Interiors and Sherwin-Williams in Portage.



Staff Updates

Welcome Jerry Czarnecki!



We are pleased to announce the appointment of **Jerry Czarnecki** as Vice President of Operations. A seasoned leader with deep roots in the Northwest Indiana community, Czarnecki joins the executive team and will oversee operations across our nine Clubs and 11 Kidstop locations throughout Lake and Porter counties.

In his new role, Jerry will be focused on driving operational consistency, enhancing member experiences, and fostering community partnerships to ensure long-term sustainability for our life-changing programs.

"I am honored to join an organization that is so vital to the success of our region's youth," said Czarnecki. "I am excited for the possibilities this position brings and look forward to working alongside this dedicated team to help our members realize their full potential."

Operations Team Updates



With Jerry's arrival, **Orlando A. Drummond**, Senior Director of Program Quality & Development, has moved into the Operations team. This change is intended to strengthen alignment and a shared understanding of the organization's strategic goals and operational needs.



Natalie Birky has been promoted from South Haven Club Director to the new position of Senior Director of Club Experience. In her role, she will be focused on elevating the quality, consistency, and impact of Clubs.



Marina Kirova was promoted from Director of Education & Academic Programming to Senior Director of Education and Academic Programming. In this role, Marina will focus on improving program quality across all Clubs.



Meranda



Kendall



Alyssa

Club Leadership Updates

We are excited to announce big changes at our Valparaiso and Kidstop locations: please join us in welcoming **Meranda Purtee** as our new Club Director and **Kendall Jones** as our Kidstop Director. Additionally, we are thrilled to welcome **Alyssa White** back to the Duneland Club as Club Director.

Club Highlights

Honoring Our Heroes

Our Hammond Club had the opportunity to celebrate National Law Enforcement Day with our heroes at the Hammond Police Department. Thank you to the Hammond Police Department for welcoming our members, showing us around, and for keeping our community safe!



STEMpreneurs: Innovating for Good

In December at the John Will Anderson Gary Club, our inaugural STEMpreneur cohort tackled real-world challenges! Participants researched the needs of vulnerable populations to develop the "Emergency Leather Bracelet," an ID tool designed for seniors with dementia and produced entirely within the Club. We are proud of our young leaders!



Creativity on Display

Members across our nine Clubs recently showcased their creativity in the annual National Arts Contest, centered on the theme "The Power of Us." This inspiring event celebrates our youth's artistry and unity, with local winners now advancing to represent our organization on the national stage.



Empowering Tomorrow's Innovators

We were proud to partner with the NiSource Charitable Foundation for their annual "Introduce a Girl to STEAM" event, which recently brought together 4th-6th grade girls for an unforgettable day of discovery. NiSource employees provided insight into STEAM careers through engaging activities. We are grateful to NiSource for providing a space where these young leaders can see their own potential.



A Wicked Good Time

Fandango treated our members to a special screening of "Wicked for Good", and our kids understood the assignment. Some even showed up in character! Thank you, Fandango, for giving our youth a "Popular" day out at the movies.



Partner News

A Truckload of Holiday Magic

Werner Christmas Wonderland teamed up with Scott Flynn of Toys 4 Kids to deliver a 16-foot truckload of toys this December! Daniel Werner's third year of giving included a partnership with the band "In Like Flynn," whose annual concert doubles as a massive toy drive. Discover how this mission brings magic to our kids; scan the QR code to watch Daniel Werner's story!



Boeing: Inspiring Tomorrow's Innovators

Our John Will Anderson Gary Club members enjoyed a vibrant holiday season thanks to Boeing's generous support of our STEM programming. From the "Blue Carpet" event celebrating our members' technical achievements to a festive holiday party, we are incredibly grateful for Boeing's continued partnership and dedication to inspiring our future innovators.



Leveling Up at the Cedar Lake Club!

Thanks to the Dawn Brancheau Foundation, our Cedar Lake Club has a revamped eGaming space! They provided new gaming systems, chairs, and fun gear that provides our Club kids with a space they truly love. The foundation also volunteered at the Club's holiday party and provided cookies and crafts that made the season merry and memorable.



Raising a Glass for a Good Cause

In December, Journeyman Distillery chose our organization as their beneficiary for their "Cocktails for a Cause," raising \$1,000 that will help create safe spaces, fuel learning, and build confidence for the next generation.



Driving Opportunity with Gurley Leep

We thank the Gurley Leep Automotive Family for their generous \$30,000 donation to our organization. Their support helps us continue creating bright futures for the kids and families we serve. We are grateful for their partnership and commitment to our mission!



Setting Sail for Youth Success with Pirates

We are proud to be chosen as one of three organizations supported by Pirates, Inc. during their latest Annual Voyage! We extend a huge thank you to Pirates for Kids for their continued partnership and their generous \$20,000 donation.



Club Family Spotlight: Marina Kirova

Senior Director of Education & Academic Programming



Nineteen years ago, Marina moved from Macedonia to Northwest Indiana seeking opportunity and stability, hoping to build a safe and meaningful life for her young family. What she found was a community that would become their village.

When she arrived, she was a new mom in a new country, raising a four-year-old and an eight-year-old, far from family and any kind of support system. She needed a quality education for her kids, a safe place for them to go after school, and a way to work so she could provide for her family. Like many parents, she quickly realized that traditional childcare would leave her working just to pay for care.

"Everything changed when I walked into the Boys & Girls Club of Portage," Marina shared. "I enrolled my kids immediately, and soon after, I was offered a position at the Club. Within days, my children were riding the bus to the Club, completing homework, learning English, building friendships, and growing in confidence.

"We went home together each night knowing they were safe, supported, and valued.

"The Club shaped who my children are today. They arrived speaking no English, and they grew into confident students and leaders through the mentors, lessons, and opportunities they found there. Today, my daughter is a senior engineer at a leading engineering company in Boston, and my son is a college junior pursuing engineering. Both remain deeply connected to the Clubs, giving back by volunteering and mentoring, just as others once did for them."

This March marks her 16th year working with Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Northwest Indiana. She has experienced the Clubs as both a parent and an employee, and knows firsthand how life-changing our mission is.

"My village believed in my kids. Now, I'm proud to be part of the village believing in our kids."



Big Heart Club: Sustainable Giving Made Simple!



Valentine's Day may be over, but we're seeing big hearts!

Founded eight years ago by our dedicated staff, the Big Heart Club is now expanding to the wider community! Join this monthly giving initiative and help create a sustainable foundation for our local youth.

For as little as \$25 a month, you can provide daily after-school meals, life-skills coaching, and vital mental health training for mentors. **Start your monthly gift today to ensure that every child walking through our doors finds a stable, well-equipped community ready to help them thrive.**

SCAN TO JOIN!



Save the Date: Our Annual Golf Outing is July 9, 2026

To reserve your foursome or corporate partnership in advance, email dkoebcke@bgcgreaternwi.org.

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