

Community spotlight

Boys & Girls Club encourages, nurtures

ALEXIA SEVERSON
LAS CRUCES SUN-NEWS

Since becoming a member of the Boys & Girls Club of Las Cruces 10 years ago, Stephanie Lopez, 16, has found success in school and is already making plans for her future.

The Boys & Girls Club of Las Cruces, 330 W. Las Cruces Ave., is the local chapter of Boys & Girls Clubs of America, a national nonprofit organization that provides life enhancing after-school programs for young people ages 6 to 18.

"For a while, I had really bad grades, so when I came (to the Boys & Girls Club), I was like, 'Can you help me with my homework?'" Lopez said. "They encourage you to do things, like basketball — that's how I learned how to play."

Lopez, who is currently the longest member of the Boys & Girls Club of Las Cruces, said mentors at the club also encouraged her to attend Arrowhead Park Early College High School and that she is now on the path to pursuing a career in criminal justice.

"I like coming here because after getting off of school, or after a stressful day, once you walk in the door, all your worries and fears just go away, so you come here and feel safe and the staff are nice, and friends," she said.

The Boys & Girls Club of Las Cruces was started by the Optimist Club of Las Cruces in 1963 in a small church building on North Alameda Street. Two years later, the club moved to its current location, where it continued to provide a safe place for children to learn, grow and form lasting relationships with peers and mentors, according to the Boys & Girls Club of Las Cruces website.

"November 11 will mark 50 years of us being in this location," said Boys & Girls Club Executive Director Ashley Echavarría. "Our goal is to be a safe and positive place for kids during the out-of-school hours, so not just after school, but also during summer, during spring break, anytime school's out. In addition to that, our priority is to get them on the path to a successful future and for us, that means graduating high school first and foremost and then moving on to something bigger."

Programs offered through the Boys & Girls Club focus on education and career, character and leadership, health and life skills, the arts and sports and fitness and recreation, said Echavarría, also a former club member.

Kids and teens at the club also get help with schoolwork and participate in other educational activities during what is called Power Hour.

"We make it our goal that they get (homework) done here with us, while they have help and they get it reviewed by us," Echavarría said.

Specialized programs that focus on topics like self-esteem, drug prevention or the importance of road safety are also offered at various times each year, Echavarría said.

The Boys & Girls Club of Las Cruces currently serves anywhere from 65 to 80 young people after school and about 100 kids during the summer, she said.

"Our average daily attendance, if you look at this whole year and compare it to last year, we are up by 25 percent in average daily attendance, which is outstanding," Echavarría said. "It was a goal for me to get more kids in the building and it's definitely happening."

However, high attendance also poses a new challenge, and plans for moving to a new, larger building is a future possibility, she said.

"Hopefully, down the



Sequal Alvarado, 6, right, plays Connect Four with Boys & Girls Club volunteer Ed Tsyitse. Volunteers serve as friends and role models to members of the Boys & Girls Club.



Faith Nino, 9, does a puzzle during free time. The club serves children after school and during summer and winter breaks.

road, that's what we hope to do, and it's not so much the location that we're not fond of, unfortunately, it's just the capacity," she said. "We're very limited in space by how many kids we can serve and the ideal situation would be that we would also have a gymnasium, which we don't have, and a separate area that we could utilize as a space for teenagers only. Right now, we do intermix the age groups."

Despite limited space, Echavarría said the Boys & Girls Club still has room for new members and that anyone is welcome.

"There are fees associated with membership," she said. "However, we do provide quite a bit of scholarships, which reduce rate and it's based on income. What we try to do is work with every family so that no child is ever turned away for the inability to pay."

The Boys & Girls Club also welcomes volunteers to help kids with homework, program activities and special events throughout the year. "It's all about relationships for us and to be somebody else for the kids to look up to, to confide in, and for them to know that they're cared for by us," Echavarría said.

Funding for club programs is raised through in-kind and monetary donations and fundraising events. A Bubble Bash SK to benefit the Boys & Girls Club of Las Cruces will be Saturday, Nov. 14.

For more information about the Bubble Bash, visit bubblebashcolor-dash.com. To learn more about the Boys & Girls Club of Las Cruces, or to make a donation, call 575-526-1519 or visit bgclascruces.org.

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Xochiquetzal Flores, 6, has fun using the New Mexico Lions Crane Reading Program at the Boys & Girls Club of Las Cruces.

What: Boys & Girls Club of Las Cruces
Where: 330 W. Las Cruces Ave.
School year club hours: 2:30 to 6:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. Office open at 9:30 a.m.
Info: Call 575-526-1519, visit bgclascruces.org or facebook.com/boysandgirlscublc.

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