

# A Voice for Kids

*As the national graduation rate falls, Denzel Washington's work with the Boys & Girls Clubs takes on new urgency*

BY ECHO GARRETT

Denzel Washington stars in the action thriller *Unstoppable*, out this month.




ily of four often had to sleep in separate homeless shelters in Tempe, Ariz., so each one could have a bed. When the shelters were full, Mona would do her homework in a cardboard box under a streetlight. She says that joining the Boys & Girls Club in sixth grade made all the difference: "It felt safe, like a family, and brought stability to my life." A captain of her high school basketball team and a member of the National Honor Society, Mona, 17, graduated third in her high school class in May and is now a freshman at Arizona State University.

According to a recent survey of BGCA alums, a full 90% have earned diplomas or their GEDs. This summer, more than 800 Bronx teenagers found work after taking a job-readiness program at their local Boys & Girls Club. The Milwaukee BGCA ran a literacy program that got 84% of students reading at or above grade level—up from 24% at the beginning of the school year. "Most people think that it's high school seniors dropping out," says BGCA President and CEO Roxanne Spillet. "But more than 67% of the dropouts hap-

pen before 10th grade. We've got to start early."

That approach makes sense to Robert Balfanz, a Johns Hopkins University research scientist who studies dropout rates. "We know which kids are likely to drop

out," he says. "They start signaling it in sixth grade by skipping school, failing math, and getting into trouble. We hope they'll somehow grow out of it, but by ninth grade they are failing everything. We need to mobilize adults to provide those students with the daily nagging and nurturing they need."

Says Washington: "Our children today are going where we lead them. We have a national crisis on our hands, but if every one of us gets involved, we can make a difference." 

**L**IKE SO MANY PARENTS THESE days, my father worked two and three jobs to take care of us," says Academy Award winner Denzel Washington, who credits the Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) with helping him stay out of trouble. Washington has been a BGCA spokesperson for 18 years—work that's become more important than ever amid reports that dropout rates are approaching 50% in some American communities. The U.S. is now the only industrialized country in the world where young people are less likely than their parents to graduate from high school. "The hours between 3 and 6 p.m. are critical," Washington says. "That's when kids need homework help, tutors, and mentors, but many are going home to empty houses."

Or no houses at all. Mona Dixon's fam-

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Denzel on a Boys Club field trip to the Mount Vernon, N.Y., police station.