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NATIONAL & GLOBAL

Mona Dixon's Story: Boys & Girls Clubs Changed her Life

Written by Corinne Garcia
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CEO Roxanne Spillett with club kids.

At 13 years old, Mona Dixon already felt completely overwhelmed by the pressures of school and home life. Living in a single parent home, she helped her mom keep the household together, leaving her little time for things like homework and any kind of social life. That's when she discovered the Boys & Girls Club, located just behind her apartment building in Tempe, Ariz.

"It was a place I could get away to, and my mom always sent us because it was a safe place," Dixon recalls. "I felt welcome every time I came. I could do my homework, join clubs, play basketball, and make friends. It just felt like a second family."

Now at 18, Dixon is in her freshman year at Arizona State University on a full scholarship from the Boys & Girls Clubs of America (B&GCA). Appointed the 2010/2011 National Youth of the Year, she also travels the country to talk about the organization's work.

Established in 1860 in Hartford, Conn., as The Boy's Club, the initial purpose was to "provide leadership and programs, while helping to establish new clubs in disadvantaged communities." Dixon is just one example of what this thriving, historic nonprofit organization does for kids and families around the country and beyond, acting as a second family for more than 4.8 million kids each year, with 4,000 facilities (in all 50 states, District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands, and at military bases overseas), more than 40,000 trained staff members, and 200,000 volunteers.

Leading the Youth

With tough youth-centric issues running in media headlines regularly, the B&GCA has its work cut out for it. But the organization also has a powerful force behind it in the form of Roxanne Spillett, B&GCA president and CEO since 1996.

"Every child who walks through our door is the most important child in our world," Spillett explains. "We are determined to be there for kids every day, with a paid professional staff, daily access, and locations where kids need us most."

When Spillett took on this role, after more than 30 years of Boys & Girls Club work, she implemented a growth strategy that set new records, doubling the size of the organization, tripling revenues, and overseeing a successful new brand headlined by Denzel Washington. This propelled the B&GCA to top rankings among national nonprofits. *Forbes*, *SmartMoney*, *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report* have all ranked B&GCA among the top charitable organizations in America "based on cost-effective use of donor dollars."

Spillett has updated the clubs, replacing wood shops with technology labs. She also keeps up-to-date on the latest issues affecting youth.

"Our mission is fairly constant, but the issues we focus on change over time," Spillett says, explaining the organization's three-pronged mission: academic success, healthy lifestyles, and service and civic engagement. "What we want is the same as what we all want for our own kids."

Graduation and Beyond

The B&GCA's focus on education includes specific programs that encourage learning, such as tutoring and literacy programs, technology labs, and a general support system. And at the same time, the clubs strive to keep it fun and active.

"Part of what we do is develop relationships with kids and create a culture where education is thought of as key," Spillett says. "The club is there to support kids in their learning and to set goals and aspirations. For instance, if mom and dad didn't graduate and kids think that's their destiny, we help them think a different way."

Another important factor, according to Spillett, is starting at a young age. "Most don't realize that 60 percent of kids are gone before they finish 10th grade," Spillett says. "So we have to start our work early. If kids make the transition from 9th to 10th grade, they have a good shot." But it doesn't stop at high school. "It's graduations with a plan for the future," she says. "Our aspirations don't end with a high school diploma. We influence the way they think about the future and teach them lessons of life."

In her local Boys & Girls Club, Dixon often used the homework assistance offered during the "Power Hour." She also participated in assessment testing that matches the skills and interests of the kids to future career possibilities. Through this avenue, Dixon decided to study business management and supply chain management to eventually work as a purchasing manager.

"They never leave any kids behind," Dixon says. "They work with you at all levels, and a number of colleges come and talk to you about what you need to do to help you better your chances."

Bullying

Bullying has been around for ages, but its presence in the media has become explosive over the past few years. "I think it's in a new place now – with technology and internet, bullying can take place 24/7, putting more and more kids at risk," Spillett says.

All clubs are designed to be welcoming, safe places, and many of the kids are often greeted with a hug when they walk through the doors. "Part of the environment of a club enables kids to disclose what's happening in their lives," Spillett says.

To educate kids about preventing and dealing with bullying, the B&GCA has partnered with corporations like the Cartoon Network. It is preparing "White House Papers" addressing different areas of bullying for parents and kids, and the issue was one of the main topics at the last B&GCA Keystone Conference with more than 1,000 students in attendance.

Individual clubs also develop their own programs and tactics. Dixon recalls when one of her club members reported getting bullied in school. After the kid's teachers weren't stepping in, the club staff addressed the school themselves to help find a solution.

Looking at the Big Picture

Whether it's bullying or graduation, the B&GCA has evolved along with the many issues faced by younger generations without straying from its original mission. The focus on a big-picture approach taps into what children really need to succeed.

"Building confidence and competence is the line of work we do all the time," says Spillett. "When kids understand their worth as human beings, their confidence grows, and they're less likely to be victims of bullying or to bully. We help kids understand that they are important." This formula is the common thread used to deal with the myriad of other issues facing kids today and in years to come.

And this approach has obviously worked for Dixon, who says her life would have gone in a very different direction if she had not set foot in her local club at age 13. "They help you build these life skills to make you successful later on," Dixon says. "The Boys & Girls Club prepares you with that foundation."



Corinne Garcia is a freelance writer and editor living with her husband and two young boys in Bozeman, Mont. She has also written for *Women's Adventure*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Northwest Travel*, *Pregnancy*, *Fit Pregnancy*, and *Fit Parent*.

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