Arkansas Youth Voice: Personal Impacts of Out-of-School Time Programs
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The Arkansas Out of School Network is a sponsored initiative of Arkansas State University Childhood Services.

AOSN is committed to creating safe, healthy, and enriching experiences for Arkansas youth during out of school times by helping to strengthen, expand and sustain Arkansas’s school-based and school-linked services to children and youth ages-5-19.

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Introduction

“Adults don’t listen to me because they don’t think I have anything interesting to say,” an 11 year-old boy explained in a focus group about afterschool programs. His insight speaks to the growing recognition of the need to incorporate youth voice in education research and reform.

“Youth voice” has become a buzzword in the academic literature about education. What does it mean? “Voice signals having a legitimate perspective and opinion, being present and taking part, and/or having an active role in decisions.” Attention to youth voice may help ameliorate the power imbalance between adults and young people.

Research shows that youth development is most successful when young people feel empowered as leaders. Such empowerment can be achieved by considering youth voice as both an evaluative tool and a guide for policy-making. Qualitative studies can help researchers access this vital voice by going directly to the source for information about why young people choose particular programs and how they benefit.

A 1999 study by Carla O’Connor suggested that only through better understanding the experiences of youth, particularly marginalized youth, can policy be effectively strengthened to address them. States like Florida and Illinois have begun to recognize the value of youth voice in this endeavor.

There is a need to gain such personalized understanding in the distinctive culture of Arkansas, where momentum behind the out-of-school time sector is building. Bipartisan collaboration on a 2008 report by the Governor’s Task Force on Best Practices for Afterschool and Summer Programs is an indication of the growing political will to expand out-of-school time learning opportunities. Surveys show that most Arkansas families agree on the benefits of and the need for afterschool programs.

This progression in Arkansas reflects the national movement toward expanding and improving out-of-school time programs. The benefits of such programs have been well researched and documented. For example, the Harvard Family Research Project and other investigators concluded afterschool programs improve youth academic performance, social and emotional development, general health and wellness, and physical safety. Afterschool programs provide a secure environment for youth during the typically unsupervised hours of 3 to 6 p.m., when youth are most susceptible to crime, drug-use, and sexual activity. These benefits are best expressed through the voices of youth.

In his 2001 study, Nagle said, “Voice is the tool by which we make ourselves known, name our experience, and participate in decisions that affect our lives.” This mindset underlies the theory behind the development of these out-of-school time profiles of youth from across the state. The narratives that follow address the underrepresentation of youth voice in Arkansas’ out-of-school time policy decisions by elevating the experiences of the sector’s most critical stakeholders: youth themselves.
When Nadia first attended the Greater Second Care Center (GSCC) Go Girl! Female Youth Initiative Project (YIP) in the 6th grade, Gerry Stewart, the youth coordinator, described her as a “chihuahua.” Volatile, vocal and highly sensitive, Nadia routinely argued and fought with other students. There is not a trace of that sullen youth in the confident, college-bound 17 year-old now, and she attributes that growth to her involvement in GSCC Go Girl! YIP. While her family is very supportive, Nadia said, “My mom doesn’t have the finances to take care of me, my brother and sister. So I live with my grandparents.”

While Nadia initially roared into the program with a hot temperament, the development of what she calls a “sisterhood” helped her transform. “Everyone had their own personal issues, problems at home, anger issues. But when we were in a group together, it didn’t matter,” Nadia explained. “I felt like I wasn’t the only one struggling. I was just judgmental before, but listening to other people’s perspective helped me understand.”

Aside from the bonds she developed with other young women, Nadia developed leadership skills from program activities. For example, she helped coordinate a GSCC Go Girl! YIP 2010 Conference. “We set it all up and had other girls from Little Rock, Pine Bluff, Jacksonville and local city leaders, educators, and a speaker come in. I felt as if I was changing something and doing something important,” she said.

These experiences have helped Nadia transition into a more confident, assured young woman. “She was insecure at first,” Stewart said. “But now she’s bold.” Nadia has learned conflict resolution skills and she serves as a peer leader in YIP. “I noticed the other girls go to her, and they feel comfortable talking to her,” Stewart added.

“There was one female in the program who went to the alternative school,” Nadia recounted. “She was always mad about something and would act out. We are taught that we are a sisterhood and a unit. We learned how to communicate with her to make her feel comfortable. She is now in her first year at Pulaski Technical College.” Nadia strives to be a positive role model and has volunteered more than 200 hours in Central Arkansas. YIP youth have volunteered in the community with multiple groups including their peers at other YIP sites, Boys & Girls Clubs, Just Communities of Arkansas and Pulaski County Youth Services. “Giving back to the community gives me a purpose bigger than myself,” Nadia said.

Ms. Stewart described the unique needs of young women in the program: “The kids come in and there’s no hope,” she said. “Some young ladies may not eat before they leave home. Some are
called emotionally abusive names by their moms. It pierces the heart when it’s their mothers that are calling them those names. That’s devastating. Makes you feel like less of a person. We try to build in them that they are strong and worthy of a great life.”

Many youth in the program desperately need the emotional, academic and physical support YIP offers. “One young lady was raped a week before she started school. I had young ladies who were raped by their mother’s boyfriends. YIP is a safe haven. A place where you can come and feel comfortable when there’s nowhere else,” Stewart said. “We just take them away from home so they can breathe and laugh and see there is some joy and life.”

YIP is based off the New Futures for Youth model. The program is aimed at offering enrichment, empowerment and safety to young women ages 13 to 19. Go Girl! is located in southwest Little Rock, an underserved area for youth. The program collaborates with schools to monitor student performance, behavior and attendance. It is particularly key for youth who are vulnerable to gang activity, potential high school dropouts, and from low-income and single parent households. The program represents single parents who are often unable to communicate with the school regularly because of full-time jobs. “Our coordinator comes to our schools to talk to our teachers, counselor and principal about grades and behavior,” Nadia explained. “We have group sessions on our dreams and visions, on self-esteem, teen violence, etiquette, leadership and preparing for college.” Go Girl! has focused on the development of personal, academic and leadership growth through positive relationships with other young women and their community.

The City of Little Rock Department of Community Programs has funded YIP sites for the previous seven years. The YIP programs came to the end of their three-year funding cycle December 2012. “This is common at the end of each three-year funding,” Stewart said. This is an unfortunate tension faced by out-of-school time programs: without extended funding, youth risk losing a support network they may not have access to otherwise.

Regardless of the potential financial concern, the young women at Go Girl! have built a sisterhood that outlasts any fiscal year. “This is about empowering young females to transition into strong women,” Stewart said, “getting them to know and love themselves and to know they are worthy.” Nadia’s journey from insecurity to self-assurance is a realization of the program’s mission. “Go Girl! has helped me feel stronger about myself, my goals and my dreams,” Nadia said.
Our House Executive Directive Georgia Mjartan dreams of “a Central Arkansas where no homeless children become homeless adults.” Michael and Morrison Brown, two formerly homeless youth, are well on their way to being a part of this vision.

At ages 9 and 8, Michael and Morrison moved into Our House shelter with their mother Mary. During this time, they began attending out-of-school time programming at the on-site chapter of Our Club. After about 10 months, Mary was able to find independent housing, and the boys moved into a more permanent home. Even still they choose to continue attending Our Club.

The goal of youth programming at Our House is to change the trajectory of the lives of homeless, near-homeless and formerly homeless children. “We’re more than just a safe place,” Mjartan said.

The sense of security is evident upon entering the Our House campus, which is located just off Roosevelt Road, an industrial corridor whose abandoned properties evoke better times gone by. Vacated medical buildings near Our House convey the sense of neglect with which this neighborhood is treated. Our House is in the midst of a capital campaign to replace one of these buildings with a new $3.8 million Youth Development Center, which will be a haven for the community’s young people.

In the meantime, Michael and Morrison continue to feel welcome at Our House. The afterschool program gives the boys a safe environment to be social and do homework. Because they do not have a computer at home, the Our Club resources are especially important to the boys. Our House has also exposed them to a variety of experiences they wouldn’t otherwise have been afforded. Many of these opportunities are part of the summer programming.

Through the six years the boys have participated in the summer program, they’ve attended a variety of field trips. Morrison’s favorite was a bowling excursion. What made this trip special was being able to spend more personal time with one of the counselors, whom he looks up to as a role model. Michael said that he’s using the summer program’s waterpark excursion as the subject for his art project illustrating the “best day ever.”

The boys initially joined the summer program because their mother worked long hours and was unavailable to provide supervision. “But after she got a better schedule, we just kept coming back because it was fun,” Michael said. “It was kind of like school but fun.” Without the opportunity to attend the summer program, the
Youth Development and Homeless Prevention: Our Club of Our House

boys would have had to stay at home alone – “probably doing yard work,” joked Morrison.  
While the boys, who are half-brothers, have supportive male family members, they have grown up with their mother as primarily a single parent. Youth programming at Our House has helped provide additional care. The boys view the teachers and counselors there as their friends. The boys also spoke of other students being role models for them and, in turn, them becoming role models for younger kids. Michael is proud of growing into this leadership role. Our House’s afterschool and summer programs made such leadership development possible.  

When Mjartan started at Our House in 2007 she recognized the need for the youth to be actively engaged during out-of-school time hours. Her first approach was to establish partnerships with other nonprofits and place the Our House youth in their programming. Retention for the full duration of the program is an important funding benchmark, and the transience of the homeless youth threatened the organizations' outcome data. Some youth were not admitted to or later kicked out of certain programs because the partner organizations did not understand their unique set of challenges.

These issues created a need for out-of-school time programming specifically targeted to this population. Mjartan responded by initiating programming on site at Our House. Because Our House provides clients wrap-around services for the entire family, the staff knows the students and their particular issues well.

The structure of Our House’s out-of-school time programming is helping the boys progress toward their goal of going to college. Michael hopes to become a pilot, and Morrison hopes to become a musician or music teacher. Michael said of the teachers at Our House, “They showed me that if I could believe in myself, then I could do way more than I thought I could.” With persistence, he and his brother will do “way more” than their circumstances dictate and overcome the cycle of future homelessness.
Love, Nurture and Discipline: P.A.R.K.

“You know what P.A.R.K. stands for? It stands for Positive Atmosphere Reaches Kids. And that is exactly what is going on in this building,” said bright-eyed Mason, a senior at John L. McClellan High School. Mason came to P.A.R.K. because of grade issues. “I was always smart but I was one of those kids who didn’t show it,” he said. Adopted at the age of four, Mason speaks of P.A.R.K. as his second home. Finding more support here than at school, Mason said, “Everyone here is for you, and not everyone at school is for you.”

In 1993, former NFL player Keith Jackson founded P.A.R.K. in southwest Little Rock, an often-neglected area of the city, to help youth overcome the obstacles of their troubled lives. The 51,000 square-foot facility houses a tutoring center, computer lab, multiple basketball courts and a weight room, among other amenities.

The program accepts students in the 8th and 9th grades and works with them through high school graduation. Eighty-five percent of students come from low-income families. P.A.R.K. offers these youth a place of educational and social support based on a model of love, nurturing and discipline. It operates on weekdays throughout the year. Program Director Jason Lanier explained, “The benchmarks P.A.R.K. sets for students challenges them to reach their full potential. The routine of ‘circle up’ prayer, academic hour and recreation time provides a structure P.A.R.K.’s members would not have in their home life.”

Mason exemplifies P.A.R.K.’s mission. “The most important thing to me is that P.A.R.K. not only helps you with your grades – that’s what the main focus is – but on the inside they help you with so much more, like attitude, personality, character. Like when I came in, I was a little rough around the edges, but now everyone looks up to me. The younger kids look up to me, even the older kids look up to me. And that’s the biggest thing to me – that I am making an impact on other people’s lives.”

The staff at P.A.R.K identifies with the youth they serve, forming bonds and going above and beyond in their commitment to the students. Lanier has been Mason’s role model for the last five years. “I look up to him like a second father. If I need someone there, I know Mr. Lanier will be there. He has proved that a bunch of times when I was down and out, he came and helped me,” Mason said.
He came to P.A.R.K. with a 2.5 GPA and now Mason stands at a proud 3.87, “the highest it has ever been,” he beamed. Additionally, his leadership skills were recognized when he was named his high school’s Homecoming Prince. When asked about a time he felt really special in the program, Mason modestly replied, “When the younger kids ask me questions they can’t ask grownups, like homework questions, or need personal advice, that really makes me feel like I’m making an impact on someone else.” He attributes his accomplishments to the “overall love” and support he receives at P.A.R.K.

Autumn has also thrived in the program. She’s in the 10th grade at Little Rock Central High School and has been at P.A.R.K. for a year. During this short time, she saw transformations in her personality. “I have changed. Here, I’m not shy anymore; I like to speak out now. Over here, I get to be myself. There’s something different at P.A.R.K. that makes me be free and helps me get my energy out.” Like Mason, she has discovered herself and built a family here. “I look up to Ms. Young. She’s one of my biggest role models. She’s like my second mom. She cares about me and knows I can do anything I set my mind to and pressures me to stay on my work,” Autumn said.

Autumn enjoys dancing and feels special when her colleagues at P.A.R.K. recognize her talent. “It makes me smile that people can see I can dance,” she said. Autumn is working hard and attending the ACT prep classes P.A.R.K. offers. She hopes to receive one of their college scholarships. P.A.R.K. has brought out the spark in Autumn, and she credits the program for her confidence. “If it wasn’t for P.A.R.K., I wouldn’t be where I am today.” Mason’s confidence is also sky-high. He aspires to be an international basketball player. “But if that doesn’t work out I would like to be a CEO of a Fortune 500 company,” he added.
Within moments of meeting 17 year-old Alexis, it’s obvious she’s a remarkable young woman. She’s personable, expressive, compassionate and confident. Most of all, it’s her passion for serving her community that makes Alexis stand out. Born to teen parents, Alexis has mostly grown up in a single-parent household, in which her mother worked up to three jobs at a time to support her and her siblings. She found herself in need of extra support to overcome her shy and reserved nature and withstand the struggles common to young people. She noted that her attitude was holding her back from reaching her full potential. “Even though I wanted to be known,” Alexis said, “it was like I didn’t want to go out of my way to be recognized for anything.”

Alexis first went to the Billy Mitchell site of the Boys & Girls Club of Central Arkansas five years ago because of its affordability and convenience, and she was drawn in by their welcoming environment. “People are willing to accept what I have to say,” she said of the club. “I actually have a voice here, even as a minor.” The support Alexis received from both the staff and members of the Boys & Girls Club helped build her self-confidence and individuality, while also inspiring her to pass along the gifts she’s been given. “Here at the Boys & Girls Club, they acknowledge you and your accomplishments, every single member,” she said.

The Billy Mitchell site of the Boys & Girls Club is located in southwest Little Rock, which has limited employment opportunities, food deserts, transportation issues, gang presences, and high rates of crime and drug use. The club seeks to provide access to positive mentoring, homework help and physical activity to take the place of potentially dangerous activities youth can get involved with.

“Without the Boys & Girls Club, the majority of these kids would be latchkey kids who are left to fend for themselves or to wander the streets”, said Jason Pedigo, with the Boys & Girls Club of Central Arkansas. The club instead seeks to inspire young people to reach their full potential by providing them a place to be themselves and grow as individuals.

Alexis began working with the program at age 14, and it was during this time that she recognized her leadership potential. As a staff member, she took it upon herself to implement a character-building curriculum with the younger members of the club. It was during these discussions on values that she realized the impact she can have on those around her. She noticed that the values she focused on with the 6 and 7 year-old members were also being instilled in the older kids in the program.

“And that kind of surprised me. I really loved that feeling, that I can help somebody and then they can go and make a difference. It’s like it
doesn’t just stop with me. It just continues on and on.” This sentiment is one that the Boys & Girls Club is proud of, “Our youth are the very people that are ensuring that generations to come follow in their footsteps,” Pedigo said. “These positive effects grow exponentially with each generation, and we think that the best is yet to come.”

Alexis, a senior at Central High School, was voted the Boys & Girls Club of Central Arkansas Youth of the Year for 2012. She attended the Arkansas Governor’s School and was recently named a National Merit Finalist. She’s volunteered more than 900 hours of community service. Alexis is an avid reader, loves Korean pop music, draws manga and is known at the Boys & Girls Club as the “Queen of Dance Central.” She’s looking forward to starting her freshman year of college in the fall and is considering a career in occupational therapy.

Alexis’s accomplishments are a source of pride for the Boys & Girls Club. “Alexis is the kind of member we wish we had a thousand of” Pedigo said. “She’s someone that younger members can look up to.” Alexis takes pleasure in acting as a role model: “The Boys and Girls Club has just done so much for me, and provided me with so many things, why not give back?”
While other students eventually go home in the evening following their afterschool program, Zoe and Zia return to their cabin on the grounds of the Joseph Pfeifer Kiwanis Camp, an 80-acre plot in West Little Rock, Ark. Though they attend public schools in Little Rock, what separates them from other youth is they have grown up living at the site of their program. “I’ve lived here all my life,” 15-year-old Zoe said. As if living at camp isn’t enough, their father is Sanford Tollette and their mother is Binky Martin-Tollette, the executive director and assistant director of Camp Pfeifer.

Zoe and Zia have a host of skills honed in the outdoor environment of the camp. The power packed duo can bait a hook, pitch a tent and start a fire faster than most adults. “I’ve been a camper since I was eight.” Zoe explained. The sisters have also experienced cultural growth alongside their outdoor skills. Their exposure to a number of people and places with the camp has expanded their vantage points. “I got to meet the Reverend Billy Kyles. He was there when Martin Luther King Jr. was shot and I got to hear about his experience in the civil rights movement. We also listened to the Little Rock Nine,” Zoe said. “I got a chance to see a world I’m not used to. It shows me different perspectives of the United States.” Her 12-year-old sister, Zia, agreed, and added “I love history so I really enjoyed seeing Washington, D.C.”

The camp has become a community that makes them feel valued. “We were coming up with a game in a group activity. Part of my ideas were used in the game and I felt good, like they were listening to me. At school it doesn’t always feel like people are listen to my ideas,” Zoe said. “I feel like there’s one reason for school and that’s learning. I feel like the camp has many reasons to be here. Fun branches out to everything,” Zia said.

The sisters also work hard to achieve leadership roles within the camp. Each summer at camp, two honor campers are selected from each cabin. Honor campers demonstrate responsibility, maturity and ethics. “When I get picked for Honor Camp, I feel important,” Zia said. “It made me feel happy. I did a lot of work nobody else wanted to do. I tried to be a good sport about everything.” Zoe serves in the Counselors-in-Training (CIT) program. The CIT program cultivates youth leadership skills and also engages in a number of service projects.

The Kiwanis Camp Pfeifer has been a part of the Central Arkansas community for more than 80 years. “It’s a year-round educational community service organization, owned and operated by the downtown Kiwanis Club,” said Tollette, the executive director. “It’s gone through a metamorphosis to meet the needs of the community as society changed.” The concept is innovative, merging the camp concepts of fun with a strong academic component. The camp currently serves 757 youth year-round. “We translate the readiness to have fun outdoors with academics,”
Tollette said. He was honored by the White House’s Champions of Change award for his service to Camp Pfeifer in September 2012.

Camp Pfeifer offers a residential Alternate Classroom Experience (ACE) for youth who have behavioral, academic or social issues within the traditional school model. During the summer there’s a one-week camp in addition to the Honor Camp and CIT program. Zia describes it as “nonstop fun.” All of this takes place in a sprawling outdoor environment, which challenges youth to learn teamwork and diligence. “When you go camping, everyone has to get wood. You can’t just flip a switch. By being unfamiliar, it puts everyone, across all demographics, white or black, rich or poor, on an equal playing field,” Tollette said.

While many out-of-school time programs target low-income youth, Camp Pfeifer has a broader perspective of need. “Kids in high rent districts have social poverty in terms of being privileged and never taking the value of what they have. They also have abuse, divorce, drugs and violence, the same as coming from a low-income environment,” Tollette said. “I wanted to create something that cut could across stereotypical imagery that targets the risk factors, regardless of the demographic.” Camp Pfeifer is for all youth that are “victims of the environment that they are born in,” regardless of where they come from.

Zoe and Zia continue to be impacted by the service of their parents. “I feel proud,” Zoe said. “It’s cool to have parents that want to help kids get a better education and have better social and teamwork skills. They set a good example for us to do service in the community. Our morals are high in how we should treat other people.”
Tony is a 6th grader at a local Little Rock middle school, who will proudly tell you that he made all A’s and one B on his last report card. While he admits that school has not always come easily to him, Tony credits the personal attention and encouragement he received from his family and the team at University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR) Children International with improvements in his grades and his many accomplishments. “They will help you no matter what, even if you struggle,” Tony said of the program.

Children International helps children through sponsorship programs in 11 countries across the world. Little Rock is its only program in the United States. The organization offers educational, health and supportive services to low-income children and families in neighborhoods surrounding midtown Little Rock. More than 85 percent of the students that attend the schools in these neighborhoods qualify for free and reduced lunches, and a high number struggle to meet annual achievement goals on the standardized benchmark tests. UALR Children International has been in operation for 18 years and currently serves 3,000 children.

UALR Children International partners with schools mainly located around the central and southwest part of Little Rock. Tony and his seven siblings live in Boyle Park neighborhood, an area of Little Rock is known for its low-income population and high gang activity. If he didn’t have UALR Children International, he says, “I wouldn’t be doing any activities and wouldn’t have known about taekwondo.”

It was in the Children International Kid’s Club program that Tony first gained an interest in taekwondo. Instead of spending his afternoons at home, he was introduced to a number of new experiences through his participation in the program. What was simply an activity during Kid’s Club turned into much more, as his sparked interest led him to continue taking classes after his Children International course ended. Through taekwondo, Tony has learned to be focused and disciplined. “It helps me not give up – can’t is not part of my vocabulary.” Developing this interest has also impacted the amount of physical activity Tony received and helped him choose healthy lifestyle habits.

Likening his work in the Mind Your Own Business Summer Camp to that of President Obama’s, Tony said the program showed him he can be a leader. His outgoing personality helped him win six consecutive presidential positions, giving him the title of CEO of the class business. Though competition was stiff in last year’s election, Tony creatively borrowed from lessons learned in taekwondo, citing his instructor’s inspirational poem “Never Give Up” to describe why he was best suited for the job. Under his leadership, the business team designed a bracelet-making company, sold the bracelets at the Little Rock River
Market and donated their earnings to the Make a Wish Foundation.

Children International requires such service-learning of their students, which has a far reaching impact on the community. “The students have to do one service project every semester, ranging from volunteering at the Arkansas Foodbank, to park beautification, to the PEDAL project. These projects pique their interests in things they otherwise might not have known about,” Education Service Manager Kristin Koenigsfest said.

Children International saw a leader in Tony, which gave him the momentum to excel academically and socially. When asked about his leadership roles and academic successes, Tony responded humbly, “It makes me feel great. It makes me feel honest about myself.” Even though Tony has graduated to junior high school, he never forgets the confidence and academic successes Children International gave him. Tony is embracing this new attitude. “I want to go to college and study music and play in a band or orchestra,” he said.
The meeting of the Girl Scouts at the James H. Penick Boys & Girls Club provides a place of comfort and quiet in an otherwise bustling building, as a group of young girls take turns reciting and discussing the Girl Scout Promise and Law. Their leader, Annette Thomas, is animated and encouraging as she gets the girls to recall their oaths to be “honest and fair,” “courageous and strong,” and “use resources wisely.”

Ten year-old Naudia, though a bit hesitant at first, stands up front to assist the other girls in the activity. Naudia goes to the Boys & Girls Club five days a week but chooses to go to Girl Scouts every Thursday over playing games or basketball. She is enthusiastic about participating in the activities, learning new things and building her self-confidence.

Naudia, a 4th grader at Bale Elementary, has been a Girl Scout for two years, participating in their afterschool and summer sessions. She is part of a Girl Scouts community program that works in collaboration with the Boys & Girls Club of Central Arkansas to provide free access to Girl Scout programming for girls who might otherwise not have become members. This is part of the organization’s national effort to create multiple pathways for girls to become Girl Scouts and participate in their leadership training activities.

Ms. Thomas spends the beginning of the meeting focusing on the mission of Girl Scouts, which seeks to “build girls of courage, confidence and character, who make the world a better place.” In the past two years, Ms. Thomas has seen Naudia transform from a shy, reserved participant to her dependable helper in class. “She’s really enthusiastic about coming to Girl Scouts,” Ms. Thomas said. She “takes charge” and helps with the younger members. Naudia said that Girl Scouts has shown her to “try to help the other people with low self-esteem.”

Girl Scouts provides opportunities to equip young girls with leadership traits and skills that help them realize the potential in themselves and build a value system that helps them make healthy positive decisions. Naudia recalled one activity in which the girls focused on self-confidence, discussing what they are good at and what they liked about themselves. “That made me feel good because I chose, well, everything,” she said.

Naudia also enjoys the opportunities Girl Scouts provides in developing her interests in science, drawing and writing. The activities give her a chance to work on these skills in a relaxed and encouraging setting. Staff members play a key role in fostering this environment, “They really help us out,” Naudia said of Ms. Thomas and the others.

Naudia sees the significance of the values they discuss in Girl Scouts. Referring to the Girl Scout Promise and Law, she said, “I think it’s good that we learn and recite them everyday, to learn the stuff to do to be a true Girl Scout.”
LaBrian is a busy 14-year-old. He is the Student Body President at Henderson Middle School. When not running the student government, he plays on the soccer and football teams, runs track and sings in his church choir. LaBrian’s mother passed away when he was in kindergarten, and he now lives with his loving grandmother and his two siblings. He credits Life Skills for Youth for “making a huge difference in my life. I have come a long way.”

LaBrian was a shy child when he joined Life Skills. “Not having a father or a mother – she was a great mother – her not being there, that just broke me down. But then when we came here we got all the help. I felt I could open up with people here, especially Ms. Angelia,” he said. The relationships he built helped LaBrian move forward both in his personal and academic life.

“I would never have had the guts to run for Student Body President if it wasn’t for the club. The skills and especially the mentoring from Ms. Angelia gave me the confidence,” he said. LaBrian not only became a leader at school, but at the program too. He was surprised when he got picked to run the game concession stand, a highly sought-after job among the youth. “I was so excited and knew I could make a difference.”

Larry Clark, Sr. founded Life Skills for Youth in 2007. He has been working with youth for 20 years, mainly as a track and basketball coach. “When I was coaching I saw parents getting younger. I saw certain life skills not being introduced into the household, mainly education. I saw kids not being able to read well and communicate well. When I saw that, it made me stop coaching and develop a program that will help the kids with certain life skills,” Clark said. He explained that young parents are still discovering themselves and need all the help they can get.

Clark chose southwest Little Rock as the program’s location because of the lack of out-of-school time opportunities for youth in this area. Life Skills is unable to keep up with the demand in the community, as evidenced by the lengthy waiting list.

One of Life Skills’ key initiatives is an Anger, Time, and Money (ATM) class, taught by LaBrian’s mentor Angelia J. Tolbert at the center every Saturday. This program “teaches positive responses to all types of conflict. We want students to take what we teach them, move it forward and apply it to their lives,” Tolbert explained. She hopes to expand the ATM program by creating a peer-resolution team who will act as community mediators in solving youth problems. LaBrian learns a lot from Tolbert’s class, especially about decision-making. “We talk about things we need to
Equipped for the Future: Life Skills for Youth

Clark and the parents work closely with each child to develop a plan to get them through high school. Life Skills works with youth from pre-kindergarten to high school and has an impressive 100 percent graduation rate. “We don’t want this to be just a school but something special – to make sure we touch their lives,” Clark said.

Clark also spoke about the importance of readying students for the future. LaBrian feels equipped for a successful career: “I would like to be a family lawyer. With me losing my mother and not having support from my father, I just want to be there for other children and show them they can have some support.”
A Young Man at a Young Age: Jacksonville Our Club

“When I got into Our Club it pretty much—it turned me into a young man at a young age,” high school junior Robert said.

Robert is an athletic 16 year-old who’s passionate about football. A starting receiver for the Jacksonville High School Red Devils, Robert is also an award-winning public speaker. He discovered his talent for public speaking through Our Club’s 4-H component and the annual 4-H competitions.

After winning 1st place in the district last year, Robert moved onto the state competition, where he finished 5th. “I practiced my butt off, and when I went in there I got 5th place—so that pretty much lets you know what you have to do and how much practice people put into these things,” he said.

Our Club has helped Robert develop other good habits as well. “I know when I was first in Our Club I was suspended for messing up like a regular kid. I have three sisters and a brother, and my two younger sisters and my brother are both in Our Club, and the stories they would tell me when I was suspended—like we did this and that and it was so much fun—it made me want to come do it, and it made me not want to get in trouble.”

Our Club is an initiative of Pulaski County Youth Services. The Jacksonville Our Club Robert attends is one of nine programs, each of which provide positive educational, social and recreational opportunities for youth in high-risk neighborhoods. The program meets on weekday afternoons at the Martin Street Youth Center, a non-descript building brought to life by the ping-pong and pool tables and buzz of young people inside.

Glen Lane, who directs the Jacksonville Our Club, describes himself as a “proud papa.” Lane is especially proud of how Robert has flourished at 4-H summer camps. “We have an African-American male—loves rap and can freestyle—but yet in the middle of a camp—with a lot of other kids who do not look like him, do not sound like him—singing corny songs. He got a Spirit Award out of it.”

Another “proud papa” moment for Lane was Robert and other Our Club members’ leadership of a day camp for 5 to 9 year-olds. Lane made a strategic decision to step back and allow the teenage club members to direct all of the activities. Robert and other members spent the day teaching the children about physical fitness and nutrition. “And the kids went home with a smile on their face. That made me feel real good, that I could help kids out,” Robert said.

Respect for his peers and working to earn their respect have motivated Robert throughout his time with Our Club. “I think seeing how smart and how intelligent everyone else was when we went other places—that pretty much shaped how I
want my academics and my future life to be,” he
said.

Robert wanted to grow into that leadership
role. “Leadership is everything,” he said. “It’s not
looking out for yourself; it’s looking out for other
people.” He asks himself, “What can I do to make
people look at me and think maybe I need to be
doing the right thing so I can be like him?”

Experiences through the Jacksonville Our
Club and its 4-H component have been
instrumental to Robert’s adolescent development.
Without these opportunities Robert said, “I’d still
be going home, eating junk food, playing video
games. It wouldn’t be speech competitions and
sitting through nutrition classes and teen
leadership camps and 4-H camp – it wouldn’t be
anything like that.”

The 4-H camps have pushed Robert to let
his guard down around different types of people.
“You might get lucky and be in the same room as at
least one person from the same county, but they
pretty much try to put you in a room with people
from all across Arkansas,” he said. “It makes me
feel good to go there and see all the different
people and the different ethnicities – if I said the
right word.”

Considering his Our Club and 4-H
experience as a whole, Robert said, “It helped me
become a young man. It helped me to believe in
myself, to know that I’m going to succeed in the
future and become somebody. It’s now my time to
let the younger kids know what they need to do.”
As an 18 year-old special needs student, Terrance knows firsthand that high school can be a tough experience. “I don’t learn very much in school,” he said. “I’ve had bullies and people who pick on me.”

Terrance recently started the DREAMS program, an out-of-school time mentoring program for high school juniors and seniors run by T.O.P.P.S. (Targeting Our People’s Priorities with Service), Inc., of Pine Bluff, Ark.

Whereas at school Terrance often feels like an outsider, at T.O.P.P.S. he finds it easier to connect with his peers. These connections help Terrance – who, like most boys his age, enjoys sports and video games – feel like a normal kid.

Terrance comes from a large and supportive family, living with his mom, stepdad and seven siblings. He mentioned that his family sometimes finds his academic challenges “worrysome,” and the one-on-one attention he receives from staff has helped him learn at his own pace. T.O.P.P.S. provides what he calls his “other family.” “I learn more new things at T.O.P.P.S. than at school,” Terrance said proudly.

As the potential first in his family to attend college, Terrance appreciates the support and guidance T.O.P.P.S. provides. “They show me colleges and how to get scholarships. I didn’t do so well on the ACT the first time I took it, and they’re working with me and helping me study for the next time.”

Terrance is planning on attending the University of Arkansas-Pine Bluff to pursue physical therapy. “I didn’t know I could go to college until DREAMS,” he said.

Annette Dove, founder and executive director of the T.O.P.P.S. program notes, “When he came, his grades were very low. Despite his disability, Terrance works very hard to improve them. No matter how long it takes, at T.O.P.P.S., as long as a student is trying, we’ll be there.”

DREAMS, which stands for Dreams Require Educating And Motivating Students, is a pilot program founded by Michael Dove, Annette Dove’s son, in August 2012. Twenty high school juniors and seniors have joined DREAMS for its first year. They meet as a group every other Sunday around a particular topic, like ACT preparation or applying for scholarships. More than that, high school senior Tiara Davis said, “it’s a motivating, mentoring program, and it’s shaped me to become a better me.”

DREAMS is run through the nonprofit T.O.P.P.S., which operates at multiple sites in Pine Bluff, a city with one of the highest crime and poverty rates in the nation. T.O.P.P.S. is a haven for youth, offering safety, steady meals, as well as academic and emotional support.

Multiple facilities house T.O.P.P.S.’s afterschool activities. Primary school students use the program’s original location, an old white house in a residential neighborhood. Vibrantly colored educational materials bring the well-kept interior
Helping Youth Pursue their Dreams:
T.O.P.P.S.

space to life, in contrast to the poorly kept homes in the surrounding area. Secondary school students graduate to a cinder block building in Townsend Park, a particularly troubled area of the city. The organization also leases a storefront, where youth staff a graphic design business, Topps Graphics. T.O.P.P.S. hopes to expand their programs and build newer facilities. “We want to take it to another level,” Dove said.

Terrance, Tiara and other students particularly appreciated a DREAMS trip to five different Arkansas universities. “I really felt like I was on the red carpet,” Jerron said. “The first night we stayed in a hotel. I felt like I was a Razorback football player. I stepped up there with my suitcase, just strutting.” Another student, Morgan, discovered Arkansas Tech has a highly rated culinary arts program, which she now hopes to pursue.

The DREAMS youth all spoke to being motivated by the program, especially by Annette and Michael Dove. “They’re pushing us – expecting us to be great,” Britain Knox said. “They stay on top of you about things.” “It gave me a reason to go to college – to experience more – to want to better myself and get a further education,” added Marcus Halliburton.

Tiara, who belongs to a family of 17 children, benefited from an ACT study night, which helped improve her score. “If they hadn’t had the study night, I wouldn’t have studied on my own. That was my motivation. And if I wouldn’t have been in the program DREAMS, I probably wouldn’t have signed up for any scholarships or did my housing application.” She said DREAMS helped her find opportunities she wouldn’t have known about otherwise.

What’s most important to Terrance isn’t the academic assistance or college preparation; it’s that “I connect with them,” he said. T.O.P.P.S. provides a community where Terrance is comfortable and can be himself. “At DREAMS no one criticizes you. They accept me and help me.” While Terrance can have difficulty making friends at school, he said the kids at DREAMS are open and accepting. “They make me feel like I’m somebody special.”
If someone had told 17 year-old Tyronda a year ago that she would become a certified police dispatcher, she wouldn’t have believed them. Tyronda lives with her four sisters, two brothers and mother in Phillips County, one of the most impoverished regions of Arkansas. While her mother is a supportive single parent, coming from a large household means Tyronda often assumes responsibility for her younger brothers and sisters.

Economic opportunity is low, and as a high school senior with no work experience, Tyronda knew finding a job in rural Marvell, Ark. would be challenging, if not impossible. She was an introverted young woman, hesitant and acutely aware of her upcoming high school graduation. Without a developed skill set, and competing in a region with one of the state’s highest unemployment rates, Tyronda’s employment prospects were as bleak as the empty main stretch of Marvell’s major road. After seeing her friends excel in the School to Work Transition Program at the Boys, Girls, and Adults Community Development Center (BGACDC), she joined the program. BGACDC placed Tyronda and 15 other youth in summer positions to gain meaningful work experience.

“She called me on her first day and you could hear the excitement in her voice,” said Louis Bennett, the youth and family program coordinator. “It was a hard sell to get the police department to host her because of concerns about unprofessional conduct from youth. The mayor recalled an experience where he once observed a youth falling asleep. But Tyronda works hard. The police chief and mayor were impressed. The chief has asked me for three more students like her.” Since this was the pilot program of the School to Work Transition Program, it was key that students demonstrated professionalism. “Tyronda represented the program really well,” added Mr. Bennett. Moreover, Tyronda spoke of the encouragement she received from the police department. Dispatchers Francis Wyssbrod and Britnee Gibbs worked closely with Tyronda to prepare her for the state examination required to gain dispatcher certification.

In addition to gaining professional skills, Tyronda has grown emotionally and as a leader. “She had to be enticed to communicate,” Bennett said. “She was shy at first. But she has blossomed.” When asked how she changed through this experience Tyronda said, “I feel like a better person. Like I can go into the world and do what I have to do in order to be a pediatrician or police officer. I feel confident in my skills.”
described her mentor, Bennett, as very encouraging and playing a pivotal role in her growth. Prior to joining BGACDC, Tyronda was on the cheerleading squad. With her newly gained confidence through the program, she felt comfortable taking a leadership position and now serves as the squad captain.

All of these experiences have given her the momentum to carve out her path to becoming a pediatrician. “I would tell youth to come and join the student workforce so they can get jobs, get out in the real world so they wouldn’t be stuck,” Tyronda concluded. “I wouldn’t have gotten this experience without BGACDC.”

BGACDC received a grant from the Mid-South Foundation to launch the School to Work Transition Program in Phillips County. The program, housed in a dusty red building on the edge of Marvell, offers youth ages 15 to 18 a holistic school-to-career model. This youth development program takes an innovative approach by teaching young people the fundamentals of employment as well as enhancing their professional skills. It also provides youth the opportunity to develop mentorships and interact with adults in different fields.

The program is aimed at equipping youth with key life and work skills to access and maintain employment and build a lasting career. BGACDC meets youth and community development needs that would otherwise be unaddressed. The program has expanded to place 20 students this summer. Previous placements include the Marvell Police Department, the Valley Law Firm, Marvell Elementary School, and Force3 Radio Station.

Tyronda is moving forward with the skills she learned at the Marvell Police Department. “I’m going back in two years to take another exam to become a level two certified dispatcher. I’m planning on paying my way through school.”
Brandi, 17, is a senior at Watson Chapel High School. An A and B student and self-described “teacher’s pet,” Brandi is enrolled in all Advanced Placement classes. She has been accepted to the University of Central Arkansas, where she’ll study pre-pharmacy. Brandi hopes to give back to the Conway community in the same way she’s given back to Pine Bluff.

Brandi’s call to service has been driven by several factors, including the strong example of her mother and her colleagues in the YouthPartners Students with Opportunities to Soar (S.O.S.) program. The program requires youth to engage in 100 community service hours each of their 10th-12th grade years. By attaining this goal, youth have an opportunity to earn a minimum of a $500 scholarship, and Brandi is well ahead of pace to achieve her award. Brandi was recognized for earning more than 300 community service hours last year.

Brandi logs most of her hours at Casa Women’s Shelter, where she’s been volunteering since 7th grade. Her experience there has helped her develop a deep sense of empathy for the women. “I think about if I was in their situation, I would want someone to help me,” she said.

Engaging in service through S.O.S. has given Brandi a more positive impression of the community. “A lot of people view Pine Bluff as not one of the best cities in the world. It’s nice to know there are good people out there trying to help others. It’s nice to know that it’s not just ‘Crime Bluff.’ It’s pretty bad here, but there are good things here too.”

Brandi lives in central Pine Bluff near Coleman Elementary School. Listening to the advice of her mother, Brandi does not spend much time outside, due to the crime. “Like, you hear gunshots and stuff,” she said. Brandi also described feeling unsafe at school. She said there are certain colors she can’t wear because of gang-related activity. Guns, knives, and bomb threats are not uncommon on campus.

In the face of these challenges, Brandi commented that programs like S.O.S. offer a safe, positive environment. “Even if the home life is bad, it’s nice knowing that you can go to these organizations and they are very positive. They give kids a positive view other than what they see at home and in their neighborhood,” she said.

YouthPartners, S.O.S.’s sponsor organization, began operations in 2001 on the heels of a Pine Bluff youth summit, which drew
more than 600 attendees. Community leaders wanted to implement “America’s Five Promises” for Pine Bluff’s youth: caring adults, safe places, a healthy start, effective education, and opportunities to help others. S.O.S. strives to respond to this need and bring youth together around meaningful service experiences.

Youth meet weekly in the Donald W. Reynolds Community Services Center, where Pine Bluff’s United Way programs, like YouthPartners are housed. This relatively new facility stands out among other run-down buildings in this section of downtown. Youth are drawn in by the attractive space and the snacks program director and mentor Linda Bateman provides.

Brandi especially values the social aspect of the S.O.S. program. “I get absolutely bored if I hang out by myself,” she said. “I have to be around people.” Although a people-person, Brandi also enjoys writing songs and poetry. She’s a dynamic young woman, destined to excel at whatever she applies herself to.

Bateman’s dream for YouthPartners is “a place where students can leave knowing they have received the best encouragement, preparation and experience to live a more healthy and productive life.” Brandi is evidence of that dream becoming a reality.

Reflecting on her S.O.S. experience, Brandi said, “I think it’s made me realize how much good I can do. I mean something to someone. I’m helping with their life – improve their life – and that makes me feel really good about myself.”
At age 14, Zachariah can play four different instruments, including the organ, which he plays for the New Community Missionary Baptist Church. He’s an honor roll student and is proud to serve as junior supervisor for the Boys and Girls Club of Jefferson County.

This chapter of the national Boys & Girls Club is situated in the low-income Townsend Park neighborhood of Pine Bluff, Ark. High crime rates, especially related to drug use and gang activity, elevates the need for a safe and accessible out-of-school time program in the area. Most members come from single-parent households. “Would it not be for us and the kinds of services we provide, a lot of students would be going home alone,” Boys & Girls Club area manager James Britt said. Zach has been attending the program five days a week for the past eight years, time that would have otherwise been spent unsupervised.

Britt and fellow staff members focus on one-on-one, personal relationships, creating a rapport with each of the 70 members. Their mission is to develop the whole child, focusing not only on academics but also self-respect and respect for others. “If you don’t teach positive, they’re going to learn negative,” Britt said, explaining that most students know at least one person who uses and/or sells drugs in their community.

The Boys & Girls Club of Jefferson County greets visitors with the words “A Home Away From Home.” Britt, who kids fondly refer to as Pawpaw, purposefully works with staff to create a family environment and give the members a sense of belonging. “Everybody wants to belong to something,” Britt said The Boys & Girls Club provides youth with a positive option, discouraging negative alternatives. Zach recognizes Britt’s wisdom, commenting, “He’s like a mentor. He’s a man I can trust.”

Listening to Zach explain his interest in becoming a junior supervisor demonstrates how connected youth are with the program. For Zach, such leadership instills a sense of responsibility and self-respect. “I felt like I was old enough – like it was my time,” he said of the position, given to high school age students to assist staff as mentors for younger members.

Though Britt knew Zach had the maturity to be a good junior supervisor, he wasn’t sure Zach would be interested. Zach had always been on the quiet side. That was until he specifically asked for the responsibility. He has served as junior supervisor ever since. Zach beamed with pride as he said, “It makes me feel like a man.”
Andrea is not contributing to the “brain-drain” in southeast Arkansas. She continues to live in her native town of Lake Village to return the favors she received as a youth. A former participant of Phoenix Youth and Family Services’ (PYFS) Rewarding Youth Achievement (RYA) program, Andrea is now a proud Phoenix employee. She says that Phoenix’s programs helped give her the “extra boost” she needed as a youth, and she hopes to provide that extra boost to some of the highest need youth in her community.

“Phoenix was a good fit for me as a student because it provided an afterschool safe haven where I was able to go and get homework done if needed, get an afternoon snack, and interact with other kids my age,” Andrea said. “The RYA program offered me the opportunity to gain work experience, improve interactions and also made me more active and aware of what was going on in my community.”

PYFS is a social and economic development organization, which aims to create opportunities for youth and young adults of rural, southeastern Arkansas through educational and job-training programs. Phoenix Youth’s programming is especially important to places like Lake Village in Chicot County, where national organizations like the Boys & Girls Club are nonexistent. Phoenix Youth is meeting this gap in services, which is felt most acutely by disconnected young people.

One particular need faced by the five counties PYFS serves is unemployment. Unemployment rates in southeast Arkansas are double the state and national average. Programs like RYA offer this region’s youth paid work opportunities, which help them develop essential employability skills. PYFS even helps youth offenders gain work by paying the first two to three months of their salary. Not only do these collaborative arrangements provide an economic benefit, they also have the potential to transform the lives of youth.

Building relationships is a key feature of PYFS programming. Andrea speaks of forming meaningful relationships with other participants and with staff, beyond her limited family network. “The setting encouraged me to socialize with different people, whom I would not typically interact with. It helped me evolve in different ways than my family by providing a social setting that encouraged positive relationships with peers.”

As a youth, Andrea also developed through the community service she did with PYFS. She said these monthly service projects helped her feel like she was making a difference.

Andrea continues to make a difference in her community by serving on PYFS’s staff, with the Families In Need of Service (FINS) program as well as with juvenile offenders. The youth development
programming PYFS provides is aimed to decrease the risky behaviors that lead youth into the judicial system by teaching employability skills, civic engagement and community involvement.

Andrea knows she is making a difference through the turnaround made by some of her youth clients. “I worked with one particular kid who was a delinquent and had recently been released from the Division of Youth Services for some violent charges,” she recalled. “He was very hotheaded and angry, but with continued work he has made significant progress. He is doing well in school, participating in various sports and headed to college in the fall. His case was closed due to him achieving the goals that were set for him.”

Even though she wasn’t involved in the judicial system herself as a youth, Andrea acknowledges the encouragement of PYFS support system in getting into and through college. Her family was also a valuable support system, and she realizes many of the youth she serves lack this structure in their lives. As a PYFS employee, Andrea recognizes the responsibility she has to give the youth that extra boost they may need to overcome their challenging circumstances and join her in the local workforce.
The clatter of DrumBallet spills into the halls of Yerger Middle School in Hope, Ark. everyday at 3 p.m. While 15 year-old De’Stani is likely to be practicing track and cheerleading after school, she still finds time to attend Intervention Hope at the Southwest Arkansas Arts Council (SWAAC) to paint watercolors, carve wood, and play the African drums that earned the program widespread recognition. For De’Stani, who enjoys poetry, drawing and music, it is an unprecedented opportunity to become more active in the arts.

De’Stani first joined the program at age nine. “When I was younger, I had a speech impediment. I stuttered,” she said. “I was afraid to talk. It was really hard. Children aren’t used to people being different.” She discovered a community at the afterschool program where she felt accepted and comfortable. “We don’t make fun of anyone in the program. It taught us that while everyone is different, we can find a way to love each other.” Where public speaking was once her nightmare, De’Stani has grown into a leader. She serves as co-president of the student council for the second year and plans to run for vice president next year.

De’Stani is not alone in her transformation. Hope as a community has experienced remarkable change. “We had one of the highest rates of juvenile commitment to youth services,” said Dr. Linda Clark, the district social worker and board member of the SWAAC. When the steel mill closed, it left approximately 500 people unemployed. The area is stricken by poverty, as evidenced by the 90 percent of students receiving free and reduced lunch. Youth fell prey to the gangs, violence and drugs that “infested” the streets. “We were looking for ways to capture those children that were going through the court system,” Clark said. “We just began to work with students who would be at risk of falling through that crack.”

Intervention Hope is recommended on referral by principals and superintendents for youth with truancy, behavior and discipline conflict. Local artists instruct the classes, which culminate in a public performance that showcases the youth’s achievements. In addition, the DrumBallet travels throughout the country to perform and conduct workshops. The opportunity to travel proves a great incentive to succeed in school, as members must have passing grades in all their classes, as well as good attendance and behavior in school and at the afterschool program, to be a part of the tour group. Founder Repha Buckman remarked, “One girl went from all F’s to all A’s so that she could go tour.”

While African DrumBallet seems like a surprising answer to the question of gang violence in Hope, the signs of its success are unmistakable in the community. The program has not lost any youth to the juvenile justice system, which was its
Finding Hope through Self-Expression: Southwest Arkansas Arts Council

primary goal. Moreover, the impact of the youth has resonated throughout the state. “We found that when children can express themselves, through painting, drawing, communicating with one another, having a dialogue about drugs and the effects on their lives, it makes a difference,” Clark said.

Over 30,000 people witnessed the DrumBallet when President Clinton asked the group to perform at the 2004 opening of the Clinton Presidential Library. In 2006, the program won the President’s Committee for the Arts and Humanities Coming Up Taller award, which is the nation’s highest honor for out-of-school time programs providing dynamic experiences in the arts and humanities. Buckman emphasized how this attention empowers the youth: “They are able to say that they’ve played for four presidents and Nelson Mandela. They ask, ‘Who else has played for 50 governors at one time?’”

For De’Stani, the opportunity to express herself through the arts has helped her gain the confidence to become a leader and public speaker. “It helped me be the me that I already was, but I was afraid to show it,” she said.

Photo by Texarkana Gazette
“When I came to Boys & Girls Club it was the best day of my life!” 6th grader Jacob beamed. Asked why, he added, “how they act – just laugh and have fun!”

Born through a complicated pregnancy, Jacob was left with a developmental disability. He was the sole survivor of triplets. Now he lives with his older brother Emmanuel and his mother Mary, who proudly refers to him as “my baby.”

Before coming to the Boys & Girls Club of Clark County, Jacob struggled to make friends. But the club has helped him come out of his shell. The friends he has made there have become his friends at school, and Mary has noticed he’s even more sociable at home. “He’s not just locked up in his room wanting to play video games. He’s wanting to talk to the family more,” she said.

Jacob’s disability had been a stigma among his peers, but the Boys & Girls Club has provided a safe place where he’s free to be himself.

Mary said of the Boys & Girls Club, “If it wasn’t for them I wouldn’t be able to keep a job.” Either she or Emmanuel would have to be home in the afternoons to care for Jacob. Now she can work, and Emmanuel doesn’t have to miss football practice or other activities.

The Boys & Girls Club of Clark County is located on the campus of Goza Middle School, where Jacob attends, so it’s easy for him to walk over when the school dismissal bell rings. The school allows the program use of its large multipurpose gym and basketball courts. Classrooms are available for tutoring sessions, and the band room hosts a steel drum club on Tuesdays.

The partnership with the Arkadelphia School District developed in 2010, when Dr. Pat Wright applied for and received a five-year 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) grant, responding to the community’s need for greater out-of-school time opportunities. “When kids get done with school, there’s nothing else to do, nowhere else to go,” Program Director Erik Edington said. While Arkadelphia is a mixed-income college town, the area surrounding the Boys & Girls Club experiences high rates of poverty.

The program is open Monday through Friday and serves between 70 and 85 youth daily. Annual fees are $125 per child, but the 75 percent of members who qualify for free lunch are eligible for scholarships. “Third Street Baptist has an afterschool program, and their fees are $60 a week. So you can see the higher-economical people go there, and we get kind of the middle and the lower,” Edington said.
Seventh grader Khennedy and her seven year-old sister come to the Boys & Girls Club daily. If not for this outlet, Khennedy said, “I would be at home sleeping. And that is it.” The structured time of Power Hour helps her get her homework done, and the activities help her feel like a kid. “I’m a very youthful person. Like if I could stay a kid I would,” she said.

Edington described Khennedy as one of his leaders. Khennedy, who also serves as class president at Goza Middle, feels appreciated by the responsibility she receives at the Boys & Girls Club, such as running the check-in desk for big events.

During the school day, students are divided by grade level, limiting interactions across age groups. Out-of-school time programs like the Boys & Girls Club, however, offer more of an open space, where Khennedy feels empowered as a role model for younger kids. “I’ll personally say that 6th grade was terrible. It was so difficult. So they’re always complaining. And I’m like, ‘I know how you feel.’ So I’ll go help them out and stuff,” she said.

The Boys & Girls Club of Clark County has a special relationship with Ouachita Baptist University and Henderson State University, whose students volunteer for the program. Khennedy appreciates her relationships with the volunteers and the mentorship they provide.

A straight-A student, Khennedy has always been a high achiever. Like Jacob, she’s blessed with loving and supportive family members. But without the Boys & Girls Club, both would be left disengaged during the late afternoon hours. Filling this gap, the program is noticeably encouraging them to blossom, each in different ways. As Khennedy said, and Jacob would agree, “It’s always something to look forward to.”
Connecting to the Community: 
Boys & Girls Club of Benton County

Reina was born in Mexico, but her family immigrated to the United States when she was only two years old. Now she is a 16 year-old sophomore at Rogers Heritage High School, and she feels a close connection to the community she was brought to. “I like to help a lot and be involved,” she said, “I’ve practically lived here all my life.”

Reina’s parents didn’t have the option of going to college, but they’ve worked diligently to provide her and her three siblings with greater opportunities. With her family’s support, Reina has always been a motivated student, but it was at the Boys & Girls Club of Benton County that she developed a passion for being a leader in her community.

Having never heard of the Boys & Girls Club, Reina’s parents were hesitant of approving her participation at first. They were accustomed to having Reina helping around the house and with her siblings. “They weren’t sure about me being gone a lot, because it takes time away from being home,” Reina said. Now they sign off on anything involving the Boys & Girls Club. “Because they know I’m happy, and I’m doing something good.”

Affordability also plays a role in making the Boys & Girls Club accessible to kids and families in Rogers. Participation costs less than half of what competitors in the area charge. “Parents of all socioeconomic backgrounds need a safe place for their youth to attend until they get off work,” said Daniel Rodriguez, Director of Youth Development. The club works to make access to quality out-of-school time programming more equitable, providing scholarships for 80 percent of its members.

It’s clear which program has impacted Reina most, as her face lights up when she begins talking about her Keystone experience. Keystone is a peer-led program that emphasizes academic success, community service and health and fitness. It was in this group that Reina was able to move past her reserved nature and began growing as a leader. “I wanted to help, but I didn’t know how. And I didn’t want to say it out loud because I was too nervous. I broke that shell here,” Reina said.

The youth make the decisions, develop the projects, and implement their plans. “We show them how influential they can be,” said Program Director Donovan Golden. In 2012 alone, the Keystoners of Benton County provided over 5,000 hours of community service, saving Northwest Arkansas over $60,000.

“We’re always trying to come up with crazy ideas about how to help our community,” Reina said of Keystone. Decisions are made as a group, taking everyone’s views into account. “We’re always saying that everyone has a voice,” she continued. One of the most meaningful experiences for Reina was traveling to Joplin, Missouri, after the tornado hit to deliver toys the Keystoners had collected for families for the
holidays. “There were kids saying that all they wanted was a house, and just having the opportunity to give them toys, it was amazing,” she said.

Reina is a big advocate for youth involvement in the Boys & Girls Club of Benton County. She sees a number of her peers “throwing their lives away,” making poor choices in school and getting involved with drugs. Reina said she is thankful for having a secure place where she can avoid these negative influences.

“It’s just helped me a lot with life,” Reina said. The Boys & Girls Club has helped her grow from “trying to be away from people to being really outgoing and meeting new people and not being afraid.” Reina plans on going to college to become either an optometrist or a political scientist. The Boys & Girls Club has helped her see “how college is really important, and you should never give that opportunity away.”
For Dieondre, being a member of the Boys & Girls Club of Fayetteville is a family affair. He’s been an active member of the club since he was 8 years old, attending both afterschool and summer sessions along with his siblings and cousins. Yet his connection to the club goes even deeper.

“It made me who I am today,” said Dieondre, who refers to the Boys & Girls Club as his second family. Dieondre, now 19, is a student at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. He decided to stay on and contribute to the club by working as a part-time youth counselor.

The club received a generous grant from the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation to open a new, state-of-the-art facility, which serves more than 600 children in the surrounding area. “We’re working to give the kids a safe environment, academic help, healthy living, character and leadership. Schools can’t do it all, homes can’t do it all, and that’s what afterschool programs are designed to do. We are that bridge,” said Glenda Deffebaugh, Youth and Family Director at the Boys & Girls Club.

Dieondre “grew up in this program.” Raised in a single-parent household with a working mother, he needed a place to be safe and have positive influences. He points to where he is now as evidence of the role the club has played in his life. “Some of my friends struggle with making positive decisions, and I do not. I credit the Boys & Girls Club for that,” Dieondre said.

The Boys & Girls Club directs kids to the right path by encouraging youth to become leaders in their community. The staff empowers members to impact change through participation in community service projects of their choice. Along with this support, the club recognizes students for their accomplishments. One of these recognitions is the Youth of the Year award, where community members meet with Boys & Girls Club staff to select one youth for showing outstanding leadership.

“When I won Youth of the Year, when they put an article of me in the newspaper, it set in that I’m really doing a big thing in the community. I’m doing something really important,” Dieondre said. Deffebaugh recalls Dieondre working five nights per week at a local restaurant, being a member of his high school football team, and yet managing to maintain a B-plus grade point average in school and still give back to his community. “Our program is a place where you can find yourself, and
A Second Family: Boys & Girls Club of Fayetteville

Dieondre found himself here. I felt so proud when he won,” Deffebaugh said.

Dieondre believes people often underestimate the impact the Boys & Girls Club can have on youth. It’s more than a childcare facility. “It is a place where kids come, learn, meet friends, and come out of their shell. Everyone is a counselor and I can come talk to everyone if I’m having trouble. It’s just one big giant family,” Dieondre said.

“This club has been a part of my life,” said 19-year old Star, another current staff member. As a kid, “if I had a problem, they helped me. If I was doing good, they rewarded me.”

Starr echoed Dieondre’s feelings about family. “Whenever I’m tired or sad, they just hug me. It is just like a family that I don’t fight as much with,” she said with a laugh. Starr’s biggest reward was when they offered her a teaching position four years ago. “I teach kids how to grow. It makes me feel more a part of it.”

Both Starr and Dieondre have developed a passion for working with youth after their positive experiences at the Boys & Girls Club of Fayetteville. They’re both in college pursuing degrees relating to youth development. “I want to give to other students what I was given. I always knew I wanted to do that – help kids,” Dieondre said.
When Emilio was two years old, his family immigrated to the U.S. from Guanajuato, Mexico to give Emilio and his six siblings a better life. Emilio graduated from Springdale High School in May 2012. However, his journey to graduation was paved with many detours and obstacles.

The founder of Youth Strategies, Mike Fohner, recalled Emilio’s time before Youth Strategies: “He was sliding into a lifestyle that was detrimental to his future. He began to get involved with a gang, and his attendance and grades at school were dropping.” That was three years ago.

Emilio joined Youth Strategies in 2010, making a conscious decision to change the course of his life. Youth Strategies is a faith-based organization, which provides opportunities to help at-risk youth develop the tools needed to escape poverty. The program is based out of the Jones Center in downtown Springdale, Ark., a block from the Alternative Learning Environment. This strategic location makes it easily accessible for youth in the downtown area and enables Youth Strategies to better connect with participants.

One of the program’s components, Social Enterprises, is a learning lab for youth development. It works in close collaboration with local businesses to provide job training and placement for high-risk youth. As soon as Emilio joined the program, he immediately started working at the Greenway Bike Shop and with the Green Team landscaping project. The Greenway Bike Shop gave Emilio technical training to service bikes. The bike shop is managed by the youth, giving them direct experience in running a small business. “Youth Strategies worked for me because they worked around my school life,” Emilio said.

This experience gave Emilio a steady paycheck, kept him away from the gangs, and motivated him to graduate.

In addition to gaining hands-on experience in a real world setting, Emilio worked towards giving back to his community. His “favorite memory” at Youth Strategies was helping a U.S. Army veteran rebuild his house, which had been destroyed by a tornado.

Building community and trust were important tools in helping Emilio avoid the negative influences in Springdale. He found support and encouragement from Mike. “I trust Mike. It’s not easy for me to trust people. But Mike really cared for me and my future.”

Emilio’s future looks promising, and he’s grateful to Youth Strategies for the growth he’s achieved. “I don’t know for sure if I would have graduated if Youth Strategies didn’t hire me. I wouldn’t be thinking about Northwest Community College if they hadn’t come along,” Emilio said.
Today, 19 year-old Emilio exemplifies the value of the service-learning component at Youth Strategies, which has helped him find a more positive path. He has a job, a car, an apartment and a girlfriend.

Developing the youth in Springdale to become economically productive and competitive in the workforce is the cornerstone of Youth Strategies. They operate for the community’s benefit, with the goals of the youth being financially self-sustaining, prepared to work in mainstream jobs and/or pursue higher education, and equipped with the character to overcome their significant challenges.

Youth Strategies began five years ago and boasts of an 87 percent success rate with high-risk youth. At one time its home-base of Springdale had the fastest growing Hispanic population per capita in the United States. Emilio is a great example for other young Hispanic males, particularly those vulnerable to gang influences in the community. He was given a second chance – a new start – at Youth Strategies. “It changed my life. It’s that simple,” he said.
A Mentoring Culture:
Adventure Club of Bentonville

Zach grew up in the Adventure Club of Bentonville. He started coming to the club in kindergarten and continues his out-of-school journey at the club. Zach is a cheery 12 year-old who attends Old High Middle School. He is an only child with two working parents. Since the Adventure Club is located on the school premises and provides before and after care, Zach has a safe place to go while his parents are at work.

Tammy Dallman, the Club Coordinator, remembers a younger Zach, “I would get a lot of requests for help regarding youth interactions and Zack being bullied. However, the program has had a positive impact on him.” she said.

Zach described his time at the Club as a growing experience. He’d previously had trouble getting along with his peers, “I learned to listen to others and try to help them out.” Zach credits his mentor and teacher, Henry Hawkins, for his change. Now, he doesn’t struggle with his interactions with other kids and has become a productive and compassionate team player. “Henry is my role model. He has helped me in the program. He keeps me focused to excel at what I do,” Zach said. Henry proudly stated, “Zach is a good kid and has come a long way. He now has an outgoing personality and always ready to help.”

The club prides itself on their passionate teachers like Henry, who has been with the club for 18 years. He explained that this club “helps kids, like Zach, who have struggled in a more traditional school setting.”

Zach has shown his leadership skills in the Movie Making Project. Each semester, the youth in the program create and produce a movie, which nurtures and empowers the youth voice. “We have a blast,” said Zach. “We can pick and choose what we want to do.” The production and premiere was successfully received and Zach beamed when he said, “I felt really good that I was a part of this movie.”

The Adventure Club of Bentonville is “going in the right path with the youth,” said Ms. Dallman. With mentors like Henry Hawkins, Zach continues to thrive in the out-of-school program. This program is especially important for the youth “because it teaches them perseverance and commitment. Just the reward from the self-worth they get out of it has a big impact on kids like Zach,” Henry said.
In 2008, 12 year-old Trinity came to Philadelphia Outreach Ministries “broken, hidden, ashamed, scarred emotionally and bashful,” said Trinity’s mother, Crystal Booth, a leader of youth programs at the Ministry. She is the oldest of six children in a single-parent household. Having come out of her shell through the program, Trinity said, “I feel free and smile a lot more, I can laugh and talk more.”

Trinity is proof of how this program is changing and influencing lives. She beams when she speaks of winning the Coronation Princess, the highest position for 7th graders, as part of the Homecoming Court at Wonder Junior High School. “I didn’t want to do it at first because I felt shy, but people here encouraged me and told me I could do it. I felt really good,” she said. Winning this title not only heightened Trinity’s confidence but also helped her develop into a leader. She hopes to share her growth with others: “I want to be that person who is a role model to better their lives and give them that confidence,” she said.

Her mother recalled, “Before we had trouble communicating and Trinity didn’t want me invading her space, but now I see a whole new person.” Her withdrawn and reserved nature put a strain on her relationships with family and peers. After being in the program for four years, she said, “My communication skills have grown very much.

Now I’m talking more and I’ve become more active.” The Confessions, a gathering of young boys and girls that the Ministry hosts every month, has helped Trinity to be herself. It has given her a sense of newfound self-assurance.

She has overcome her shyness by joining the interpretative dance team. Dance has become her outlet of freedom and self-expression. While initially performing on a team, she now develops her own dance routines and performs solo acts both at the Ministry and in the community. Trinity’s hard-earned confidence has helped her better connect with her peers at school.

The Ministry serves as a counterforce to the high violence in West Memphis. In a community ridden with crime, gunshots and gangs, Philadelphia Outreach Ministries provides a safe and enjoyable oasis for the youth. Despite the violence, Booth said, “We still go out and do our part. We interact with the people in the community. We sing Christmas carols and visit the nursing home.” Trinity gives back to her community through dance, by performing at the nursing home and daycare facilities.
Every summer, the Ministry organizes a Youth Explosion event – a free community party with music, dancing and barbeque. The event “shows the youth in the community that you can have fun and you don’t have to be in a gang to do it. We try to reach out and show them that there is another outlet and that youth do not have to prove the statistics right,” Mrs. Booth explained.

Trinity is perceptive of her community’s needs. “Like me, I feel my community needs more confidence. And the Ministry helps a lot with that.”
At six years old, Pamela isn’t very certain of much in the world but knows that learning English is difficult. Pamela was born in Mexico, and her family has joined the high influx of Hispanic families to northeast Arkansas in pursuit of a better life. Pamela’s mother, Rosa, works as a janitor, and is working to learn English at home. Her father works in construction.

“Things can be confusing when your parents are speaking Spanish to you, and your teachers are speaking English,” said Madison Fowler, the afterschool program coordinator at Hispanic Community Services. “We offer a place for Hispanic children to come and converse with like-minded children who are in the same bilingual, confusing situations. We offer them a place where they can be themselves.” Having this kind of comfortable environment is especially important for youth whose academic setting deviates substantially from what they’re used to, helping them overcome feelings of discomfort or isolation that can negatively affect their behavior and performance in school.

Rosa enrolled her daughter at Hispanic Community Services even before she started at Blessed Sacrament School. “I’d heard of the Hispanic Center and the help they give to kids. I brought her so they could teach her,” Rosa explained. While Pamela is a bright and creative girl who loves coloring and art, she had difficulty in school because of the language barrier. “Her English skills were not up to par when she first started coming a year ago. She could only say ‘hello’, and ‘how are you’” described Fowler. The language conflict made acclimating to her new environment challenging. She was shy and withdrawn initially both her mother and Fowler said. Pamela struggled in school, specifically in reading, spelling and language arts.

Pamela worked hard, receiving individualized tutoring five days a week at Hispanic Community Services and then studying at home following the afterschool program. Her hard work and the one-on-one assistance have paid off. “Her grades have seen such an improvement since she’s been coming. Her English skills are better. She can better communicate with her teachers and her instructors here, with people out in the community,” Fowler said proudly. Improving her English and finding a supportive community has helped Pamela adjust and succeed in her new surroundings.

Hispanic Community Services strives to meet the needs of the growing Hispanic population in Jonesboro. The organization is on the north side of the city, facing an intersection beside a scrap metal facility and railroad tracks. While this location has faced skyrocketing crime and violence, the small white building that houses the Hispanic Community Services is crammed with the rapid-
paced voices of children, speaking in an excited mix of Spanish and English. Colorful art, designed by the youth, makes the small space look inviting and warm. The organization is filled not only with children, but their families too. Hispanic Community Services provides afterschool care, translation services, computer and English classes and many other free services to support families.

“It’s difficult to cater to the needs of all of the families,” Fowler acknowledged. Many families have no transportation or share one car in large extended families. “I get calls from school counselors saying they have students that need to come, but they can’t get here,” she added. With transportation, Hispanic Community Services could expand to reach more youth.

Despite this conflict, the organization still exposes youth to public service and the community. “They need to learn the importance of helping others, and we try to stress that in the classroom,” Fowler said. Pamela will be volunteering for the first time at the foodbank. Since Pamela’s school does not have many Latinos, she also assists in her school in Spanish class. “I have to teach them a lot. When we’re in Spanish class they’re always asking me, what is this? What is this?” Pamela said. This interaction and budding confidence in both languages has helped Pamela come out of her shell.

Larry Davis, a volunteer who has worked with Pamela for the past six months, has also witnessed her transformation. He said her personality has brightened, and she has become more interested in school now that she has a better grasp of the language and concepts. He feels passionately about the work Hispanic Community Services does, emphasizing it as a way to level the playing field for youth who find themselves behind their peers. Fowler echoed this sentiment, saying, “We aid Hispanic children in their schoolwork and their social skills, in order to acclimate them to this world – give them a sense of identity and help them through school.”

For Pamela, her hard-earned English skills have given her the lifelong tools to navigate the classroom and flourish in her new environment.
The deck was stacked against 17 year-old Tynekiau. Born to a 13 year-old mother, Tynekiau became an adult before her time. Her mother died at 18 due to complications from the birth of her second daughter, Trinity, who struggled for 10 days before passing on. At age five, Tynekiau lost both her mother and sister in the same month. “My dad’s been incarcerated my whole life. He’s never been there,” she said frankly. With her father out of the picture, Tynekiau went to live with her great aunt. While Tynekiau described her relationship with her aunt as “close and supportive,” growing up was challenging. “She’s disabled,” she explained. “I come home from school and I have to do the cooking, the cleaning and everything else.”

It was during church with her aunt that Tynekiau was introduced to City Youth Ministries. She became a junior volunteer and has been attending City Youth for two years. Participating at City Youth has helped her grow. “Last year I was depressed. I blamed myself for my mom and dad not being there. I beat myself over it. Coming here, I can come out of my shell,” she said. Her performance as a weekly volunteer has impressed Michael Hames, the afterschool program coordinator. “I know what some of her struggles are personally, and to think that she goes through all that and she still comes here and gives her time. She doesn’t have to. She’s somebody we can count on.”

City Youth, which is nestled between a scrap metal facility and railroad tracks, targets at-risk youth in Jonesboro, Ark. Hames noted that the demographic City Youth serves live predominantly beneath the poverty level. On the north side of Jonesboro, where the program operates, the crime rate is high. Theft runs rampant, along with increasing street violence and vandalism. “The reality is students may not be in a safe place if they don’t come here,” Hames said. “At the end of the day, if things don’t go well, I think at least they were safe. Where would they be right now?” he asked.

City Youth offers a variety of programs including mentorship, tutoring and college preparation. “I’ve seen kids with teachers at school who are telling them they’re doing bad and not getting encouragement, then they come here and they can be seen for who they really are,” added new staff member Cody Bray.

Devonte, 18 year-old City Youth volunteer-turned-employee and Jonesboro High School defensive tackle, also speaks to the support he received through the program. “They’re helping me with my career,” he said. “We’ve been doing ACT practices. They help us sign up, they prep with us,
they pay for it, and if we can’t get there they’ll pick us up and take us to the test site.” Devonte, a newcomer to Jonesboro from Memphis, particularly appreciates the routine snacks and meals. “My mama is disabled, she has a heart condition,” he explained. “It was hard for my dad to find a job because of conviction problems. Some days we might have barely enough to eat or it’s hard to find something to eat. But since we moved to Jonesboro, our lives have changed.” His appreciation for the meal provided at City Youth is echoed by a high number of afterschool youth; for many, the steady meal may be their only.

“We’ve become family to a lot of these kids – sometimes the only family they have,” Hames said. While City Youth is understaffed and relies primarily on volunteer support, the four full-time staff members go above and beyond for the youth in their care. “Before Christmas last year, I wasn’t expecting nothing. I don’t think my mama had enough money. She gave me a small fund and I used it to pitch in on a bass guitar. I put in $60 and they put in the rest. It was almost $200. They’re really supportive,” Devonte said. The generosity and concern of City Youth struck a chord with him. While the staff has spent money out of pocket plenty of times, it’s not the material giving but the emotional support that matters most.

When 12 year-old Justaney was acting out, the support of City Youth helped her transform from perpetually angry to a confident young woman. “I was just a ghetto chick in the streets, sassy and disrespectful. I was mad and I had to take it out on something, and that something was here,” Justaney described. After developing relationships with staff and other youth, Justaney changed. “Now she’s a leader among her peers. Normally we don’t allow her age to be a junior volunteer, but we made an exception because she stood out,” Hames said. Her transformation was so striking that Justaney was asked to speak at an upcoming banquet of City Youth donors and supporters. Shrinking capacity and resources has placed an increasing urgency on the success of the banquet. “I think they asked me because they saw a past tense of me and a present tense of me. It’s about how City Youth changes lives, and they saw it changed my life,” Justaney said, feeling a jumble of nerves and honor.

Tynekiu, Devonte and Justaney all serve as junior volunteers and contribute not only to the organization that has become their backbone, but also to the community. “We’re really trying to reach back to the community. We don’t want them to come to City Youth and have that be the end of their exposure and growth,” Hames added. Service projects have run the gamut from making cards for nursing homes, to park cleanups, to participating in a large scale Martin Luther King Jr. parade.

City Youth has had a transformative impact on each of the youth – offering a support system to Tynekiu, stability for Devonte, and a chance to grow for Justaney. “Back then I didn’t believe in nothing. I didn’t believe nothing was possible,” Justaney reflected. “I didn’t believe I could be a lawyer or a doctor. City Youth is when I started believing.”
Conclusion

Montrose, Ark. is a town of 528 people. It is a low-income, farming community, where education, recreation and employment opportunities are scarce. There are no schools, grocery stores, restaurants, libraries or gas stations.

In 1981, Henryetter Curtis saw a need. The children of the community were – and still are – bused 13-17 miles to school every day, and afterwards, she said, “There was nothing for them to do, and no one paid attention to them.” In response, Curtis founded the Montrose After/Out-of-School Program. She invited the youth to a previously abandoned building to enhance their literacy, improve their computer skills, create art and learn to sew clothes. Over the years, the program served “as a second home for the kids.” It encouraged them to stay in school and away from drugs and alcohol.

In 2009, the Montrose After/Out-of-School Program had to close its doors. The grants the program relied upon were time-limited, and when they expired, the program was no longer able to sustain operations. The loss of funding has cost Montrose youth one of their only options for safe and productive engagement after school. Montrose After/Out-of-School Program is just one example of the financial challenges out-of-school time programs face.

The narratives depicted in this report describe how out-of-school time programs have transformed the lives of many young people in Arkansas. The youth express how their programs are providing a safe haven, nurturing relationships, and new opportunities for growth.

These stories of hope, courage and achievement, which put a human face to the research-demonstrated program benefits, can lay a foundation for informing policy and funding choices to better support the sector.

Currently, Montrose has around 60 youth with no access to out-of-school time programs. As demonstrated by their stories, many Arkansas youth depend on the support they would be missing were it not for these programs. The Arkansas Out-of-School Network hopes to express the youth voice articulated in these narratives to advocate for the survival of organizations like the Montrose After/Out of School Program and the benefit of similar programs across the state.
Endnotes


3 ibid, p. 366

4 ibid, p. 359


12 Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 363