

Impact Maker

2021 \$100,000 Grant Recipient

Boys & Girls Clubs of Palm Beach County Project FACT (Fathers and Children Together)

By Sandi Schwartz

Boys & Girls Clubs of America is a household name. In 1860, the first Boys Club was founded by three women in Connecticut who believed that boys who roamed the streets should have a positive alternative. In 1931, the Boys Club Federation of America became Boys Clubs of America. Then in 1990, the organization expanded to serve girls as well and updated its name to Boys & Girls Clubs of America. With 7.7 million kids and teens alone and unsupervised after school and nearly 25 million without access to after school programs, the Boys & Girls Clubs of America plays a more important role than ever in communities around the country.

In our local area, there are clubs in both Boca Raton and Delray Beach with the mission to help young people reach their full potential as productive, caring, responsible citizens. These centers provide a world-class experience that assures success is within reach of every young person who walks through a club's doors, with members working hard to graduate from high school, demonstrating good character and citizenship, and living a healthy lifestyle. The organization transports kids from schools to clubs so parents can pick them up at the end of their workday. Open until 8pm in most locations, the clubs provide a snack, hot meal, tutoring, college prep support, and plenty of fun activities as well.

Project FACT (Fathers and Children Together) seeks to empower and mobilize fathers and father figures to become more engaged in their children's lives.

Impact 100 awarded the Boys & Girls Club a \$100,000 grant in 2021 to support and expand Project FACT (Fathers And Children Together). This grassroots, community-based initiative seeks to empower and mobilize fathers and father figures to become more engaged in their children's lives, improve fathers' parenting skills, and enhance the academic engagement of the children of fathers who actively participate in the program. Services include weekly programs for boys and young men; fatherhood curriculum for fathers (including group sessions covering mental health and family law services); the annual Fathers & Daughters Dinner & Dance; and FatherFest, an affirmation and celebration of fathers and their children. "The Impact 100 grant allowed us to expand the program into Delray and Boca. We were also able to add an educator for south county," explained Kimberly Sovinski, Chief Development & Programs Officer.

A key component of FACT is the Passport to Manhood program, which teaches boys what it means to be a responsible man. They use the 24/7 Dad curriculum from the National Fatherhood Initiative; the lessons and discussions are led by the program head and several father educators. Even during COVID, the group was able to hold classes online to keep the connections going. "Over 360 boys recently graduated in December. We start new groups each year," mentioned Kimberly. This program for boys helps expand the reach to dads as well. "We often recruit dads from the group of boys who went through Passport to Manhood. We also partner with schools, nonprofits, and churches to get more dads involved."



Another particularly meaningful part of FACT is the Tying of the Tie activity. “This event helps get fathers involved. Many boys don’t have fathers in their lives, which is what makes our program so valuable,” said Chilondra Sheppard, who oversees Project FACT. During this beautiful ceremony, each boy receives a blue tie and learns how to tie it with the help of either their dad or a father figure. “The most important piece was to see all the men gathered in the room—all sorts of dads of different ages and backgrounds. What we are doing is so special. It is something we are passionate about, and it is resonating throughout the community,” declared Chilondra.

The Fathers & Daughters Dinner & Dance is also quite special, and a wonderful opportunity for dads and their daughters to bond. Chilondra explained, “The father daughter dance is so important to give dads time with their daughters. Many dads are not in the home with their daughters and don’t know how to engage with them. This event forces them to interact. We help lead table conversations about topics like what the dads are afraid of so girls can understand and see their dads in a new light. It is an amazing opportunity for dads to have a meal with their daughters.”



FACT is also hosting Father Fest in February, which will include workshops pertinent to fathers and representatives from local community service agencies. They are anticipating around 500 attendees. Another component of FACT includes Strong Schools, which involves Donuts for Dads in school, math night, science night, and more.

FACT has been quite successful, and Impact 100 has played a major role in this success. Boca Raton and Delray Beach have seen a significant increase of fathers/father figures attending meetings on behalf of their children, as well as improvements in their co-parenting relationships. "We get positive feedback from moms and dads. This work has been very sensitive and moving for moms as well," Kimberly said. She believes that the program has huge potential, and they intend to take it to scale to reach as many families as possible. "Moms, dads, and kids desperately need it."

In looking forward, the staff hopes the program will continue to grow. Chilondra highlights the importance of FACT during a time in which gentle parenting and emotional intelligence are priorities. "We are integrating fatherhood into social emotional learning. As fathers are going through the workshops, there are so many childhood traumas that bubble up that we often make referrals for additional help—anger, commitment issues, and more. They are really learning how to manage their behavior and emotions. The same thing happens with the boys." FACT offers much-needed support to those participating. The boys look forward to the programs and the larger conversations that result. "FACT provides a unique opportunity for boys to share their feelings and talk about how they can be connected to their fathers and other male role models."

What is really exciting is that while FACT is unique to Palm Beach County, there is the opportunity for it to be replicated throughout the United States. Keep an eye out for more FACT news in the future as it possibly spreads to new communities in need.

Want to get involved? There are many ways to volunteer with the Boys & Girls Clubs in our area. You can tutor, read with children, lead

art projects or science experiments, help feed the kids at dinnertime, donate supplies, talk about your career, etc. Contact Jillian Taylor, volunteer coordinator, at 561-683-3287 or visit <https://bgcpbc.org/volunteer>.

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