

# A passion for leadership

Anthony Villa is Youth of the Year at the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell

By Jon Winkler

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Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell Youth of the Year Anthony Villa, 17, of Lowell, left, plays one-on-one basketball with Devan Long, 15, of Lowell while at the club last week. SUN Julia Malakie

It's 4 p.m. and Anthony Villa is a bit late walking into the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Lowell. He plans on working late as he usually does, helping children and teens participate in activities from foursquare to robotics until 8 p.m.

Four hours of volunteer work after school seems like a hefty chore for the 17-year-old. He usually starts his days at the club at 2:20 p.m.

But all the time and effort Villa puts in to helping kids in his community has made a big impact. He was recently named the club's Youth of the Year.

Though only a junior at the Greater Lowell Technical High School, Villa earned a \$1,000 scholarship that the club will hold until he decides which college he wants to attend. He will also compete for the State Youth of the Year honor in May.

"This was my third year applying for the Youth of the Year and honestly, it felt good to finally win," Villa said on Friday. "It means that all the work that I've put into the club, building myself and just becoming a leader has finally paid off. It's not about the recognition but it definitely feels nice to finally have something to show for it."

Villa started coming to the club when he was 10 years old at the suggestions of friends from school, whose stories about the club were so exciting to Villa that he asked his mom to sign him up. The club takes in children from the first grade all the way up to high school seniors, so there was quite the age gap between Villa and other kids.

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Not that he minded.

"There were a lot of people that I didn't know," Villa said. "There are so many kids from all different grades, it was kind of a shock, but I was also really excited to get in here. I feel like I made friends from other places pretty easily just because of common interests."

Once he became a teenager, Villa said he was slowly moved into leadership positions after his enthusiasm and participation impressed club staff.



Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell Youth of the Year Anthony Villa, 17, of Lowell, right, talks with Pathways manager Na Lam of Lowell, who works with teens. SUN Julia Malakie

Villa does everything from help oversee basketball games going on in the club's lower level gymnasium to working with teens as part of the organization's community service group Keystone Club. He also participated in the club's Junior Staff program in the summer, helping to monitor up to 60 kids in daily activities and learning how to help each individual when needed.

"I learned that each kid is different and it helped to be friendly with the kids," Villa said. "First thing I'd do was go over and introduce myself with a smile, then talk to them about what they're doing. Anything to get them to talk."

His first real outstanding leadership moment, as he describes it, came last year when he was a youth mentor to the club's FIRST Lego League robotics team, where kids learn how to build and program tiny robots with Lego pieces and take them to local competitions. Villa noted that the club was using the same robotics kit as he was using at Daley Middle School and jumped at the chance to lead the club's team after being part of the team for three years.

"I don't even remember being nervous, I was just more excited," Villa said. "I really love robotics and anything to do with it. When I got the opportunity to lead the team, I had already known a bunch of the members of the team from previous years and it wasn't that hard to get to know the new members. It was just easy to work with them."

Though Villa has his sights set on going to a college with a software engineering program, he says he's thinking of returning to the club in the summer to continue volunteer work. While he's still at the club, Villa wants to inspire more participation from teens at the club. His fellow volunteers and staff see that Villa's participation is not in short supply.

"Sometimes when I have a question about what to do, he's usually there to help me out," said Victor Fernandez, who helps out kids in the club's computer lab.

"He has a willingness to learn and always up for something," said Na Lam, the club's pathways manager. "Kids have a knack for learning from him."

"The biggest thing that drove me was making connections and taking the opportunity to make those connections," Villa said. "I've gone to mixers, I've gone to shadow events, I've gone to college tours, I've gotten to see companies. I've just taken everything that I could to learn about every industry out there just so that I can see what's out there and help me make up my mind."

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