

Hungler providing the anchor he knows kids need

A journey from shy teen to Hall of Fame leader at the Boys & Girls Club

By Alana Melanson, amelanson@lowellsun.com

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Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell Executive Director Joe Hungler plays the game Connect4 with Danny Long, 9, at the club. At rear, from left, are Ronald Henry 12, Dyandre Fourier, 12, and Julissa Turkson, 11. SUN/ David H. Brow

LOWELL -- Joe Hungler can still remember clearly the first time he set foot in the Boys & Girls Club of Manchester, New Hampshire.

Then 14, Hungler had followed his older brother there to participate in a basketball league.

"I was very shy as a teen," said Hungler, now 49. "The club helped break me of that."

Little did he know walking through those doors would be the start of his life's work in helping kids and teens find opportunities for recreation and development.

Hungler is now well-known as executive director of the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell. Since he arrived in 2010, the club has grown considerably: its budget and staffing doubled, daily attendance increased by 50 percent, 50,000 meals are served at the club annually, and a makerspace, dance studio, career and college readiness room and expanded teen center are among many new additions.

"Success isn't because of any one person," Hungler said. "It's because a team came together and made things happen."

From his early experience as a club kid, Hungler grew into a career within the Boys & Girls Club system. What he learned then continues to inform how he leads the club today.

Hungler grew up in a middle-class home in Manchester, in a safe setting with both parents. Many of the kids he met at the club faced far more challenging circumstances, including poverty, violence and substance abuse.

Having seen how the club "was their anchor, the place that they felt safe, the place that they could go to with any problem," Hungler said he knows the importance of providing a safe environment and strong adult role models for kids.

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"That's really what drives me, is to make sure we can break the cycle of poverty, and to make sure that we can teach kids how to have a very promising future," he said.

At the club, Hungler found a number of mentors who provided him with opportunities and advice, then and continuing to the present. He took their investment in him to heart, and became a mentor to many others.



Hungler talks with Na Lam, Pathways Manager for the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell.

When he was inducted into the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Nashua Hall of Fame last month, a group of the kids he worked with there in the 1990s, now grown up, were there to cheer him on -- along with many of his Lowell board members and their families.

His mentoring goes far beyond the region, serving as a national training associate since 2001.

In Manchester, Hungler was a two-time New Hampshire State Youth of the Year, and worked in various roles for about 11 years before he was hired as athletic director at the Nashua club in 1994. He served three years in that role and three as individual services director.

Hungler was there during the transition from the Boys Club to the Boys & Girls Club, and worked to establish the girls' athletic program and ensure they had equal opportunities. He coached the first girls' basketball team, which later went on to win the New England Championships.

Hungler formed partnerships with local schools, using the club as an incentive for kids who weren't engaged in the classroom but won awards for club activities. Multiple kids went from Ds to the honor roll "because they didn't want to miss out on the club," he said.

He also helped change the culture, encouraging kids to set goals and plan for their future, whether it was college, Job Corps or another path.

"He really helped set the tone for continuous improvement," both with youth development and the club itself, said Nashua club Chief Operating Officer Kurt Norris.



Joe Hungler plays ping-pong with Mario Rojas, 13, at the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell recently. SUN/ David H. Brow

He said Hungler spent countless extra hours making sure kids had what they needed and supporting them to be successful. Hungler also developed a mentoring program to help young professionals who work with youth become more effective, Norris said.

Hungler was an integral part of the national awards the club received in 1999 for sports fitness and recreation and in 2000 for character & leadership development and best overall program.

During a nearly two-year stint as program director at the Waltham club, Hungler was contacted by Mario Pena, a Nashua club alum he mentored, to partner with him on a project. He helped Pena start the Los Amigos Conference on Higher Education, designed to help the next generation of club kids.



Joe Hungler chats it up with teens, from left, Timmy Guzman-Dias, 14, Jackeline Mestre, 14, Carlos Rodriguez 13, Robert Pattelena, 15, and Channel Paris, 13, at the club recently.

It became a national model for the Boys & Girls Clubs of America.

In 2002, Hungler became director of operations at the Worcester club, where he was involved in an "Extreme Makeover" with the local ABC affiliate TV channel. Like in the TV show, which made over homes, the club made over its satellite teen club at Great Brook Valley, a public housing project in the city, making the space less institutional and more comfortable and inviting.

They fixed up the gym, added a lounge area, repainted the space, enhanced the waiting and check-in area, reduced noise, added furniture and completely redid the bathrooms.

"Fixing bathrooms doesn't sound sexy, but it's amazing what it does to give people dignity, and to feel like you're in a place that values you," Hungler said.

He was also involved in building a new, 46,000-square-foot club that served the kids better than the nearly 100-year-old building it previously occupied.

"Joe's got that very unique quality, where any kid from a first grader to a teen, he can relate," said Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell Trustee Brian Chapman. "It's a sort of warmth he can bring, that the kid knows, 'This person really cares about me and will do whatever he can to help me in my situation.'"

Chapman, who was chairman of the Board of Directors in Hungler's early days in Lowell, said the club wasn't in a good place at the time. Donations were down, and people were losing confidence in the club's leadership, he said.

Part of building that trust was in moving to Lowell and becoming part of the community.

Hungler took on the difficult task of assembling a team that could get the club back to "that really respected place in the community where kids can not only be safe but get that chance to better themselves," Chapman said.

Director of Operations JuanCarlos Rivera said Hungler's leadership is centered on giving youth a voice and allowing his team the space to be creative and do what they do best. Whenever staff members are facing a challenge, Hungler coaches them through solving the problem, in turn making them better leaders, Rivera said.

"He doesn't stand there and think that he has all the answers," Rivera said. "I think that's part of why he's been so successful. He not only relies on his team, but he looks at community partnerships as well."

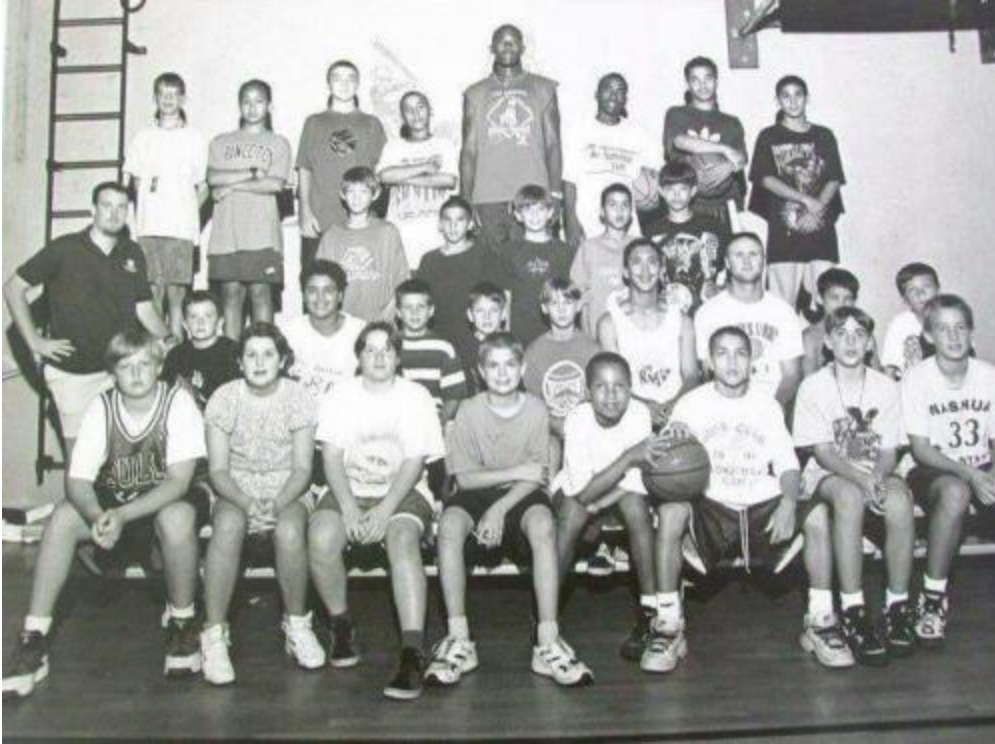
Under Hungler's leadership, program development has gone from average to "bordering on excellence," Chapman said. He's pushed the STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) Club, developed the robotics program and strengthened the club's relationship with UMass Lowell, Chapman said.

He said that connection with the university also led to the 2016 opening of the club's music room, a studio where kids can try their hand at recording and broadcasting, and receive musical lessons. It has also meant bringing kids there to visit engineering labs, meet with staff and see aspects of higher education they may not have been exposed to otherwise, Chapman said.

When the club was in desperate need of building upgrades, Hungler worked with the board and the city to secure grants to fix the roof, the heating system and gym ventilation, Chapman said.

That set the stage for an upcoming campaign for an extensive renovation and expansion of the facility, Chapman said.

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Joe Hungler, standing middle row, far left, in his days as athletic director at the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Nashua. Here he's with a mix of adult and teen volunteers and participants in a summer basketball clinic about 1994. Courtesy photo

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