

Honoring a young leader

Club celebrates Youth of the Year John Long



Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell Youth of the Year finalists, from left, John Long, Alix Huynh and Xavier Holman, exit the bus at the UMass Lowell Inn & Conference Center for the March 30, 2023 ceremony in which Long was announced as this year's winner. SANFORD TYSON SMITH PHOTO/COURTESY BOYS & GIRLS CLUB OF GREATER LOWELL





Long, 17, said that even a few weeks after he was chosen, he is still in shock, and that he truly thought one of the other finalists would have won. He was up against fellow club members Xavier Holman and Alix Huynh, who each also grew up in Lowell.

“It was surprising. I still feel like my friend Xavier was Youth of the Year, not me,” said Long. “I’m kind of still in shock.”

Long first came to the Boys & Girls Club when he was in sixth grade, but stopped going after two weeks. He returned when he was in eighth grade, and has remained a member ever since, and is now one of the club’s youth leaders in addition to his Youth of the Year distinction. The club gave him options for things to do, he said, beyond sitting in a room all day and playing video games.

“Coming here gives me opportunities to go outside, have fun, learn new stuff about nature or robotics,” said Long.

Long, like many nearing the end of high school, recently went through the college application process, which can be tedious and frustrating on its own. His search concluded with him choosing UMass Lowell, where he will study computer science. To Long, the Youth of the Year process was even more intensive than his college search.

The club’s Special Events Manager Misha Burleson said Long had to be nominated, have a community reference letter from a staff member and go through multiple interviews before the formal application process.

“He is more surprised than us, because through that whole process it just shows how dedicated they are to being excellent individuals and leaders,” said Burleson.

Long was ultimately selected, Burleson said, because of his leadership, especially in times of frustration.

“ said he embodied what they would refer to as a ‘servant leader.’ A humble leadership, and it really resonated with his honesty and willingness to do things for others. Being called to lead without choosing to lead,” said Burleson.

The community reference letter for Long was written by Jenna Kapp, the club's Pathways coordinator. Kapp echoed Burleson and the judges in calling Long a leader, something she said Long would never refer to himself as.

"I think that is what sets him apart from the other two candidates. They certainly would refer to themselves as leaders, but John would almost be embarrassed to say that," said Kapp.

"But I've seen him in leadership situations, so regardless of whether he is or not, I've seen it in action." Kapp recalled the leadup to the 2021 Lowell Kinetic Sculpture Race, where participants build human-powered movable sculptures to race through the streets of Lowell.

"This was a very stressful time, because the summer program is always really busy here, and without even really choosing it, everyone kind of naturally selected him to lead that process," said Kapp. "It was kind of intimidating because we had to build a team from scratch, and I thought what was most impressive was his patience. He didn't get frustrated with anybody even when I was becoming frustrated with the whole process."

The race that year ended up being canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, adding to the frustration, but Long took it well, Kapp said.

Long also serves a role as a youth leader in the club, in which he helps with day-to-day tasks like setting a schedule, bringing younger club members to the bathroom or with conflict resolution when the younger members are having disagreements. He is assigned as the youth leader for the club's music space, where he also brings his photography skills, at least until his Fujifilm camera was run over by a truck.

Long will now compete for the statewide Youth of the Year award against the winners from dozens of other Boys & Girls Clubs in Massachusetts this May at Gillette Stadium. Should he win that, he would be able to compete for the Northeast Regional Youth of the Year title, followed by a national competition.

Before Long was announced as the winner at the March 30 ceremony, one of the four judges, 2007 Youth of the Year Moijue Kaikai, said that if he had been up against Long, Holman and Huynh, he probably would not have been the winner.

"The things that you all talk about, the goals that you have, if it was 15-year-old Mo in this competition with you all, I couldn't hold a candle to the three of you," said Kaikai.