

Boys & Girls Clubs of Miami-Dade hailed for performance

By MARILYN BOWDEN

The Boys & Girls Clubs of Miami-Dade last year won the fourth annual Switchboard of Miami/Katz Barron Squitero Faust's Most Valuable Non-profit All-Star Award, which recognizes a nonprofit demonstrating outstanding performance, positive impact on the community and paramount service to clients—an achievement that has also earned the clubs Miami Today's 2016 Gold Medal Award for an Organization.

Boys & Girls Clubs, now in its 70th year, offers after-school programs in core programs such as homework assistance, arts & crafts, literacy and social skills. Additional programs include music instruction, tennis, karate, dance and intramural sports. The program runs concurrently with Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

"We see a high need for affordable educational programs for kids," says Boys & Girls Clubs of Miami-Dade President Alex Rodriguez-Roig. "What makes us effective is that we stick to our core principals—helping kids and helping families. Our mission hasn't changed in 70 years."

"We don't need to be popular or trendy. We just want to help the kids out."

That persistence and dedication is paying off in big ways. According to an independent study by Damooei Global Re-

search, the annual impact of the clubs on the Miami-Dade community is \$78 million.

That impact is measured in several ways. Improved high-school graduation rates result in increased lifetime earnings. Affordable after-school programs help parents to remain employed or attend classes to upgrade their skills.

There's also a huge economic gain from keeping kids occupied during the after-school hours, when teens are most likely to get in trouble. For example, during the period of the Damooei study, none of the teen girls attending the clubs became mothers. The rate of teen child-birth among girls not attending the clubs was 21 per thousand—at a cost to taxpayers of \$255,022 per birth.

Damooei computes the county's annual savings from the reduction in youth crime rates and arrests attributable to the clubs at \$5.59 million.

Mr. Rodriguez-Roig estimates about 8,000 youngsters ages 5-16 attend Boys & Girls Clubs of Miami-Dade across its five facilities. "We always want to be able to service more kids," he says, "but that depends on our financial resources. We have a professional staff, but volunteers are the key to making everything happen."

The clubs can help kids stay motivated, he adds, by giving them the opportunity to pursue their own interests in a



Boys & Girls Clubs of Miami-Dade President Alex Rodriguez-Roig with some of organization's 8,000 kids.

safe environment.

"A lot of times kids have little time at school to explore their interests," Mr. Rodriguez-Roig says, "and at home they may have limited internet access. That's something they can do at the clubs. We have a robotics program, a music program—little things that augment our other programs, sometimes in a big way."

"It's like an ice cream shop that has a lot of different flavors so everyone can find one they like. That's how we keep the young people engaged, so they're eager to come to the club."



Louis Wolfson III of sponsor Pinnacle Housing Group presents the Gold Medal award to Alex Rodriguez-Roig of the Boys & Girls Clubs.

Miami Lighthouse's contributions in health, education cited

By MARILYN BOWDEN

Miami Lighthouse for the Blind & Visually Impaired—the oldest private agency in Florida serving the blind—received two major awards in 2015. A Sapphire Award from Florida Blue Foundation acknowledged it as an outstanding nonprofit community healthcare organization; the Beacon Council's Distinguished Industry Award honored it for outstanding contributions to education.

In recognition of these tributes, Miami Today's Gold Medal Award judges have given Miami Lighthouse the 2016 Silver Medal for an Organization.

From its beginnings in 1931 in a 900-square-foot bungalow, the nonprofit has grown to a 55,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art educational and rehabilitation center serving the blind and visually impaired at every stage of life, says Miami Lighthouse President & CEO Virginia A. Jacko.

"We have a major expansion under way," says Board Chair Ramon F. Casas, "that will include full-service daycare and pre-kindergarten for blind children in collaboration with Miami-Dade County Public Schools and the Early Learning Coalition. We're already offering intervention from birth, but now we'll be able to do so on a daily basis."

Daily instruction in Braille, math and using an iPad, Ms.



President & CEO Virginia Jacko has strengthened Miami Lighthouse.

Jacko says, will ensure that when the children enter the public school system "they will have all the skills they need for a level playing field."

Miami Lighthouse's four mobile eye care units provide free eye exams and glasses for kids having trouble at school due to impaired vision but whose parents can't afford eye care services.

"A survey of the parents of 1,400 kids assisted in that program showed that 74% had academic proof that their child's performance had improved by getting glasses from us at no cost," Ms. Jacko says.

As children enter their teens, the Miami Lighthouse focuses on preparing them for employment.



Miami Lighthouse Chairman Ray Casas, left, and President & CEO Virginia Jacko receive the award from Joe Jimenez, vice president for legal and regulatory affairs of the sponsoring Codina Partners.

"We're helping them do whatever they have to do to be ready for a career—such as getting them job-shadowing opportunities as well as jobs during spring break," Ms. Jacko says. "Our GED program for blind adults, a collaboration with Miami-Dade County Public Schools' Adult and Career Technical Education programs, includes help for those who first need to take English as a second language."

Numerous challenges face people who lose their vision as adults—a group that is growing as the population ages. Ms. Jacko says studies show one in four adults over 75 will experience uncorrectable vision loss. "They need to relearn how to

use a computer, cook, put on makeup, label clothing, do laundry, cross the street safely with a guide dog and do their shopping, among other things," says Ms. Jacko, who speaks from experience. A former university executive, she originally came to Miami Lighthouse as a client determined to learn how to continue to be a successful administrator.

Her success as chief executive of the nonprofit speaks eloquently of the effectiveness of its programs.

"When I began at Miami Lighthouse 10 years ago," she says, "we were serving about 450 people annually. Now we assist more than 15,000. That's because the need is great."