

LOWELL

Offering kids 'a path to a better future'

Boys & Girls Club launches capital campaign for expansion

By Alana Melanson
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LOWELL » JuanCarlos Rivera was a member of the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell when he was

growing up in the city, and it had a big impact on his life.

"It was a home for me as a kid, and it's good to see that so many of our kids still see it as a home," said

Rivera, who is now the club's director of operations.

When Rivera began coming to the club, its focus was more on recreation. Now, it has expand-

ed into an "encompassing program that caters to all the needs of the young people," Rivera said.

As the club looks to further expand and support that mission, it is under-

taking what those involved agree is an ambitious \$18 million capital campaign aimed at renovating and expanding its existing building on Middlesex Street.

Executive Director Joe Hungler said that as those at the organization went through the process of planning the renovations, they realized that the goal

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isn't the building itself, but to end generational poverty. That led to the capital campaign's theme, "Believe & Become."

"The goal is not just that the kids have a safe place to play, but that they have a path to someplace where they can find a career, whether that's college, or a blue-collar career, or coding, whatever it might be," he said. "And so that really focused our efforts ... to do what we need to do to make sure every kid who walks through our doors has a path to a better future."

After several months of private fundraising, the campaign was brought public last week, with a kickoff event held Nov. 3.

A number of people have already contributed to the campaign, including three local philanthropists with longstanding ties to the club, who have provided \$1 million each, Hungler said. He said the donors asked to not be named, because they're in it to better the lives of the kids, not the recognition.

As of Tuesday, the campaign had collected just over \$8 million toward its goal. Hungler said the organization also expects to receive about \$2 million from the federal New Markets Tax Credit program, which aims to spur investment and economic growth in low-income communities.

"This is a very ambitious goal for an organization of our size, and indeed for the city of Lowell," said John Carson, of Chelmsford, who is co-chairing the campaign along with Dr. Mark Gilchrist, a Chelmsford pediatrician.

It may be ambitious, but it is worthwhile and necessary for the future of the Greater Lowell area, Carson said. He pointed to the Lowell Judicial Center down the street, noting the club is looking to raise less than a tenth of what it cost the taxpayers to build the new courthouse. Carson said the club can have an even bigger impact on the youth of the area, by showing them a path out of poverty.

"Obviously, the whole purpose of the court system is to bring kids and adults to justice, and we think that our kids and teens deserve a better future than one behind bars,"



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE BOYS & GIRLS CLUB OF GREATER LOWELL

An artist rendering shows of how the lower level of the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell will appear following a renovation and expansion. The lower level will have a brightened interior and expanded cafe and community center in the space once occupied by the pool. The club recently began the public portion of its \$18 million capital campaign to fund the project. Below, a rendering shows the exterior.



Carson said. Hungler said he expects construction to start in early 2022, and that it will be fully complete in mid- to late-2023. He said the club plans to stay open during construction, using alternate parts of the building as the project progresses.

Patrick Tighe, a renowned architect based in Los Angeles and a former club member, is donating his services and has been incorporating the voices and needs of the kids, families and staff throughout the design process, Hungler said.

Rivera said the young people have been excited about being involved in the process, from the colors to the program spaces they want, and it gives them a sense of ownership and pride.

The project aims to renovate and expand the facility from 40,000 square feet of usable program space to 53,000 square feet, with the goal of doubling the number of young people ages 8 to 18 served each weekday from 300 to 600. That will also require doubling the amount of staff, creating both full- and part-time job opportunities, and bringing the organization's annual budget

from \$2.2 million to \$4 million.

Hungler said the existing building, which opened in 1974, has "given as much as it has to give." Some of the upgrades are necessary, such as HVAC, plumbing and accessibility improvements, he said.

"Overall, it will be a building that is much more functional and efficient, but most importantly, a place to give kids hope and opportunity," Hungler said.

All spaces will be updated and expanded, providing dedicated places for many programs that are now in makeshift settings, such as robotics and dance. Arts programming will be significantly expanded, with the addition of a black box theater, larger recording studio and maker-space.

Rivera said these amenities will provide club members with new opportunities to explore and express themselves, potentially opening them up to career paths they may not have considered.

There will be more quiet areas for tutoring, homework help and meditation, as well as more career and college-focused programming and expanded mental health services.

Each day, the club cur-

rently serves an average of 225 meals to members, who must eat in shifts because the cafeteria can only hold about 90 people, Hungler said. The renovation will expand the kitchen and dining facilities to

prepare and serve 500 meals at once, in a space that can also be used as a community center, Hungler and Rivera said. The expanded kitchen also provides the opportunity to teach the kids skills like how to cook and bake, Rivera said.

A new Teen Center, separate from the rest of the building, will have its own entrance and offer expanded programming for teens in an inviting space, Hungler said.

Club alum Valentine

Kong is looking forward to what the expansion will mean for the youth of the city. He said the club being able to take in more kids and keep them out of trouble "is just a beautiful thing."

Kong, 24, began going to the club when he was 8 years old. As an adult, he comes back every year to coach in the Peace League summer basketball program.

Through the club, Kong said he found a second home and his closest friends, learned about leadership and confidence and had a number of experiences he'll never forget. He also met his mentor, Joey Banh, who taught him about entrepreneurship and helped him establish his promotion and event planning business, Take One Entertainment.

Kong urged everyone to donate to the campaign.

"The club is almost halfway to their goal. To see them accomplish that goal would be amazing," he said. "They have given back so much to the community."

For more information about the renovation and expansion, and to learn how to contribute to the campaign, visit <https://believe.lbgc.org/>. To arrange a meeting with Hungler to discuss the project, contact Director of Development Angel Brunelle at abrunelle@lbgc.org or 978-458-4526.

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