



WILDESIDE

BY EVELYN WILDE MAYERSON

Welcome To The Club

THE FELLSMERE BOYS AND GIRLS CLUB IS GETTING A NEW CLUBHOUSE



Keisha Rainey is surrounded by Diego, Dayana, Joel, Jeremiah, Natalee, Cai, Joel and Victoria.

Part of the fun of weaving copy is that you sometimes have to get into a car and drive somewhere to experience what the French call the “mise en scene,” the feel of the place. I recently visited the city of Fellsmere, 10 miles inland on County Road 512, one of three locations of the Boys and Girls Club of Indian River County. The county is wide open, 617 square miles of pinelands, scrub, hardwood hammocks, prairie, boggy wetlands, a Chinaberry tree planted beside the remnants of an early porch to ward off fever-borne miasmas, above, a “Truman Show” vista of baby blue sky.

The first municipality to be incorporated in what is now Indian River County and the first in Florida to grant women the right to vote, Fellsmere was once

dominated by acres and acres of citrus. Its population of largely farm workers living in established families, many of whom own their own homes, is somewhere around 5,500, the number of C-Series robots currently working on the factory floors of Suzuki. Fellsmere is on the rural edge of the county, where a Mexican bakery called Garcia’s sells pinatas and freshly made Bavarian cream waffle cones, a community garden allows locals to grow their own vegetables, a convenience store called Azteca sells tortillas, the site of the short-lived National Elephant Center stands in lonely isolation, and Marsh Landing restaurant specializes in Southern cuisine such as fried okra and alligator tail, which is reputed to taste like chicken, although it’s my belief that the only thing that

tastes like chicken is chicken.

My destination is the construction site of the newest clubhouse of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Indian River County, an 8,000-square-foot parcel of land leased from the city for a dollar a year, located adjacent to the City Hall, once the local school. The new one-story clubhouse is expected to cost \$2 million; funding was given a major push with a million-dollar donation by dedicated Fellsmere volunteers Larry and Karen Mulder. The building’s anticipated completion is in January, in time for Fellsmere’s next Frog Leg Festival. This annual event serves over 5,000 pounds of frogs’ legs, which makes the festival, according to the Guinness Book of Records, the largest frog leg festival in the world.

“The new building will let us take in 40 more kids.”

— KEISHA RAINEY



Kaleb enjoys his time in the art room.

Keisha Rainey, the branch director of Fellsmere’s Boys and Girls Club, is waiting for me in the parking lot behind City Hall. A tall woman with a strong presence, she steps out of her car to be greeted by two young men in hard hats calling from the building site only yards away. “Hey, Miss Keisha — over here!” Rainey squints for recognition, waves back then turns to me. “That’s Leo Trejo and Robert Sanchez. They must be working for the cement company. Both are former club members.”

Like the two young construction workers, everyone in Fellsmere knows “Miss Keisha,” and she in turn knows each of them as well as their families, in some cases going back four generations. Appointed last April as the grand marshal of the Fellsmere Day Parade, Rainey

speaks of Fellsmere as a largely Hispanic, family-oriented community with very little crime, a place where “everybody knows each other.” Accompanying Rainey to the Dollar Store, where she is greeted in every aisle, is a lengthy project. In addition to her high visibility as the director of the local Boys and Girls Club, Rainey was born and bred in Fellsmere, where her father worked for Fellsmere Farms and her mother worked in the company mail-room. Even after earning a B.A. in public administration from Edward Waters College in Jacksonville, Rainey returned home to teach special needs students at Fellsmere Elementary School until she was recruited by the Boys and Girls Club to direct its Fellsmere operation.

We walk past the miniature diorama of early Fellsmere, under glass in

the lobby of City Hall, down to the Boys and Girls Club temporary facilities in the raised basement, flooded out several times in the past few years, some of the space partitioned off for the Frog Leg Festival. I’m shown a technology room that houses a bank of computers, an art room, a multi-purpose room with a cooler stocked with hundreds of snacks, a game room and a study room. “The new building,” Rainey says, “will let us take in 40 more kids. We’ll even have our own kitchen with a pass-through that opens to a shaded patio.”

Rainey describes the day they broke ground, bright and sunshiny with kids wearing hard hats and carrying golden shovels, while Mayor Joel Tyson quipped that, besides the Dollar Store, the Boys and Girls Club was the best thing to



Aleah, Kyleigh, Leslie, Yazlyn and Maya play the board game "Life."

happen to Fellsmere in 50 years. Tyson may not be alone in his opinion. Impact 100, an organization of women who recently named BGCIRC as one of three recipients of a \$100,000 grant each, might possibly agree that the club is among the best things that has happened to Indian River County, if for nothing else than its promise of success for every young person who enters its doors.

I visit the Vero Beach club's house to check out one of those doors, open 50 out of 52 weeks a year, each school day from 2 to 6:30 p.m., and during the summer or on school breaks from 7:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., the canonical hour sometimes called evensong when the kids go home to supper. Club members of all sizes, from NBA height to the reach of a fire hydrant, most with backpacks hanging from their shoulders like folded wings,



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are jumping out of buses and hurrying to swipe their plastic ID cards into the scanner. Before they are eligible to do this, their parents are obligated to attend an orientation program that spells out what they can expect from the club and what in turn is expected of them.

Each youngster appears as purposeful as anyone would be on his or her way to the promise of success, a goal that has many faces. For some it is a safe, positive place to be, where you can get help with your homework from a qualified tutor, for others a chance to learn how to hit a rim shot on a snare drum, to create a spreadsheet, to execute a jump cut in soccer. For many, success is simply promotion to the next grade, an achievement in which BGCIRC can claim a success rate of 98%.

I visit the club's executive director, Elizabeth Thomason, formerly associated with Saint Edward's School, whose office is behind the administration building on the Vero Beach campus. Joined by Phil Barnes, director of resource development, who writes the club's concise and informative newsletters, we toured the grounds, the scene of a recent 14,000-square-foot expansion with a gym and an outdoor playing field that has allowed the club to clear its waiting list. When I mention Keisha Rainey's hand-in-glove fit as branch director of Fellsmere's club, I am told that the same holds true for the other two branch directors, Barbara Cross of Vero Beach and Jim Russo of Sebastian. I also learn that in less than 20 years, BGCIRC has grown to serve 1,500 children, a sound investment in our community, in which there are 28,000 children, with the number living under disadvantaged circumstances at around 21%, although all youngsters are free to join.

I am struck by the buzz of palpable energy, something like an electric grid on low power. Determined by grade level, every club member is actively engaged in one of four major activity centers: music, athletics, arts/media and technology. Somewhere along the way, they are also taught critical thinking. I see evidence of this on the basketball court, where a kid is arguing with the intensity of Columbus at Salamanca trying to convince the clerics that he could reach the Indies and not fall off the edge of the earth. The boy's level reasoning reminds me that even though he likely discusses zombie combat and school locker searches with the same zeal, he is probably the same age as the prehistoric genius who first captured fire.

The Boys and Girls Club nourishes this potential by focusing on six core programs: Leadership and Character Development; Education and Career Development; Health and Life Skills; Sports, Fitness and Recreation; the Arts; and Community Service. Like the club's logo of clasped hands, core programs often interlock and reinforce each other. The teen program's Keystone Club, for example, a club within a club designed to develop character, is also dedicated to promoting the value of community service. "Smart Moves," a resistance training program that offers club



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— KEISHA RAINEY

members strategies to avoid drugs, alcohol, gang activity and bullying, falls under Leadership and Character Development but serves at least three of the remaining five core groups.

The Boys and Girls Club's newest initiative, “Destinations,” is the star around which Impact 100 has hitched one of its three wagons. “Destinations” is all about transition. Shakespeare chose the forest for his transitions, the magical wilderness of the Tempest, the glittering forest of Arden. In John Fowler's essay “The Tree,” the forest is where revelation takes place. Since Indian River County's great stands of pines have long since been cut down, a more likely chrysalis for its young people may be BGCIRC's year-round career preparatory program, a GPS that shows the way to developing marketable skills and exposes young people to potential career paths and then helps them get there.

“Destinations” offers workshops in how to sell yourself to prospective employers, meetings with guidance counselors, monthly guest speakers from a variety of agencies, college and work-site visits, internships and leadership summits. While learning the fundamentals of application and resume writing, club members also prepare for a successful interview with a focus on the necessary subset of skills, including punctuality, eye contact, handshaking and the writing of a follow-up thank-you note.

As a result of “Destinations,” Kiara, a 10th grader at the Fellsmere club, will be attending the Foundation for Teaching Economics Seminar at UCLA this summer; Keigan, age 16, a member of the Vero Beach club who plans to become a master electrician, was given a summer job by Casano Electric, and 17-year-old Olivia, named Sebastian's Youth of the Year, will attend a week-long camp in computer science at the Florida Institute of Technology in Melbourne.

Meanwhile, 225 kids are anxiously awaiting the completion of the Fellsmere clubhouse, designed by architects Edlund, Dritenbas and Binkley and being built by Proctor Construction. An interesting side note is that Donald Proctor, a longtime Vero Beach resident and president of Proctor Construction, was a member of the South Miami Boys and Girls Club over 60 years ago when the club was still called the Boy's Club of America. ☘