

# Team CG Welcomes the Boys & Girls Club of America

*Story by Lt. Scott Barton, Air Station Borinquen, Aguadilla, Puerto Rico*

AGUADILLA, Puerto Rico -- There are more than 50,000 brave active duty, reserve and support personnel in our Coast Guard. While many of us are on call for any threat to our nation or emergency at sea, our children are back on shore facing the same challenges children face everywhere. As we all know, growing up as a Coast Guard "brat" often has its unique challenges; frequent moves, changing schools, and uprooting friends and families to list a few.



Children from Coast Guard Air Station Borinquen's Boys and Girls Club of America sit on the steps to "Survival Beach." Photograph by Erika Wagner, Borinquen, Puerto Rico.

These difficult situations combined with today's modern and fast paced society, an increasing number of dual career parents, coupled with long work hours, deployments, and often awkward work schedules, an increasing number of children are at home with little or no adult care or supervision. In fact, in every community across the world, young boys and girls are often left to find their own entertainment, recreation and companionship in the streets. These young people need to know that someone cares about them.

The Boys & Girls Club of America (BGCA) offers that and more. Club programs and services promote and enhance the development of boys and girls by instilling a sense of competence, usefulness, belonging, and influence. Boys & Girls Clubs are a safe place to learn and grow, all while having fun.

As part of a truly historic event, Air Station Borinquen, Aguadilla, Puerto Rico, along with seven other Coast Guard bases and Air Stations (Integrated Support Command (ISC) Honolulu, ISC Ketchikan, Coast

Guard Sector San Juan, Coast Guard Training Center Petaluma, Coast Guard Training Center Cape May, Coast Guard Air Station Cape Code, Coast Guard Sector Staten Island) large enough to have youth center facilities, will now benefit from BGCA's quality national programs, professional development training, grants, services, and technical assistance support.

Unit MWR offices sponsor the BCGA. Gary Scheer, Coast Guard Director of Morale, Well-Being, and Recreation (MWR) is very excited about the Coast Guards affiliation with the BGCA. "There are so many benefits for our children and staff: the high quality programs, the professional development opportunities, the grant opportunities. This is a natural marriage."

Lt. Cmdr. John Rivers, MWR Officer at Air Station Borinquen stated, “This is truly a historic event. For the first time in our service, the Coast Guard will be affiliated with the BCGA. The community kids are truly excited. The BCGA provides a positive after school alternative in our remote and unique multicultural and diverse community. It’s great to see the children making friends, smiling, and having fun”.

At Air Station Borinquen, more than 60 young adults have enrolled into the BCGA program. It is estimated that among the eight participating bases, more than 1,000 Coast Guard kids will have the opportunity to be BCGA members.

Tom Gilbert, MWR director at Air Station Borinquen since 2004 and Air Force retiree, is a BCGA alumnus. Starting at age 7, Gilbert attended the Tonawanda BCGA club in Buffalo, New York, everyday after school. Gilbert, familiar with the BCGA, program, exposed top leadership in the Coast Guard to the many benefits of the organization and got the process rolling.



Children enjoy an afternoon with their friends and families during a Boys and Girls Club of America visit in December to the local bowling center. Photograph by Erika Wagner, Borinquen, Puerto Rico.

“Growing up, the staff members at my club were my heroes. They kept me off the streets and into supportive programs that pointed me in the right direction for life. Today, it is great that the children and teens of the Coast Guard have the same programs and support as the kids of the other military services.” According to Gilbert, “We are trying to empower young people to make informed decisions about their physical, mental and social well-being. Our goal is to improve Club members' knowledge of healthy habits, good nutrition and physical fitness; and strengthen their ability to interact positively with others and engage in healthy relationships.

In the four months since the base began working with the BCGA, Gilbert and his staff have partnered with the local Ramey base school to provide three unique and different BCGA programs: Power Hour, SMART Girls, and Passport to Manhood. Local volunteers chose specific programs suited to the needs of the youth in the community.

The Power Hour program is an internationally recognized, award-winning comprehensive homework help and tutoring program designed to raise academic proficiency and educational performance. The SMART Girls program is a health, fitness, prevention/education and self-esteem enhancement program for girls ages 10-15. The program, sponsored by Tupperware Brands Corporation, is designed to encourage healthy attitudes and lifestyles that will enable early adolescent girls to develop to their full potential. At the same time, the Passport to Manhood program promotes and teaches responsibility while reinforcing positive behavior in male Club members ages 11-14.

Passport to Manhood consists of 14, small-group sessions, each of which concentrates on a specific aspect of manhood through highly interactive activities. Each participant is issued his own "Passport" to underscore the idea that he is on a journey of maturation and personal growth.

The Borinquen Club is looking to establish future Keystone and Torch Club programs. These programs, sponsored by the Taco Bell Foundation and Staples, are chartered, small-group, personal leadership development clubs for young people ages 11-18. Within these programs, children elect officers, choose their own activities, and plan and implement community service projects.

Erica Wagner, BGCA Unit Director at Air Station Borinquen and another BGCA alumnus said, "Helping youth is one of my personal missions. Without the love, guidance and genuine care of every staff member at my BGCA club, I wouldn't have become this strong and productive person. I have a strong belief that if a child grows up in a caring, loving and responsible environment, they will grow up to be strong, caring and responsible individuals. The Boys & Girls Club can, and will, provide that type of atmosphere."

Rivers said, "Helping youth become responsible caring citizens and assisting them in acquiring cognitive skills for adulthood is invaluable. The BGCA provides them an opportunity to forge relationships, build confidence and independence, and mature all in a celebratory and fun atmosphere. But more importantly, it's a way to help kids develop a positive self-image, as well as a sense of purpose, responsible behavior, and a healthy attitude and lifestyle.

Paulette "Poppy" Bednorz, Programs Director for the BCGA at Air Station Borinquen, said, "Children are our greatest resource. We need to emphasize that our youth are an important and sound investment in our future.

Boys & Girls Clubs offer kids a place to go that is safe, fun, and exclusively for them.

"This alone shows our kids that they are loved, respected, and most importantly, that they matter. When kids experience these benefits of the club, it helps foster self confidence and self-worth which will in turn help them make the right choices. We all know that the ability to make the right choices will lead to healthy and successful futures. It is evident that the programs and goals of the Boys & Girls Club play a key role in making this happen. I feel very fortunate to be involved with a progressive organization that has a positive impact on the lives of so many children. It makes me smile just thinking about it," said Bednorz.

Rivers said, "All children have self-worth and deserve nurturing and support. The BGCA is great in that it provides this in a fun, low cost, and supervised atmosphere. Our programs use a team approach involving club staff, peer leaders, parents, and community representatives. Volunteers are essential in making the BCGA a successful and positive place for kids. So encourage members of your community to take a break from their busy lives, join a worthy cause, and make a positive difference in someone's life."

From homework help, to open houses, parades, picnics, performances, and fundraisers, there are many opportunities to learn how you can make a difference in the life of a child. For more information, check out the Coast Guard's MWR website or the BGCA website at [www.BCGA.com](http://www.BCGA.com).

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