A History of the First Three Decades of the Olivet Boys and Girls Club in Reading Pennsylvania (Book 2)
Mary Ann Mengel, Written by students at Penn State Berks

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By Laurie Grobman  
**Penn State Berks**

The project that led to this booklet is a form of what is known in higher education as community-based undergraduate research-instruction that partners students, faculty, and community organizations to fill a community need. The Olivet Boys and Girls Club in Reading, Pennsylvania has a rich history; it was founded in 1898, and it is one of the original 50 chartered members of Boys & Girls Clubs of America. The organization has served thousands of boys in Berks County for over a century and girls officially since 1990. During the 2014 Spring semester, more than 40 students in four courses at Penn State Berks partnered with the Olivet Boys and Girls Club in to begin to document and share the organization’s compelling history. That work resulted in an 86-page compilation titled *A History of the First Three Decades of the Olivet Boys & Girls Club in Reading, Pennsylvania*.

This book, titled *A Continued History of the Olivet Boys & Girls Club in Reading, Pennsylvania*, involved students in two first year writing classes (taught by Laurie Grobman), one course titled “Women Writers” (taught by Laurie Grobman), and one sophomore-level writing class (taught by Professor Ray Mazurek). In each class, students’ research and writing was framed within a specific theoretical and instructional approach.

Moreover, all students experienced a challenging and new (for most of them) way of “doing history” through what we came to call the “Olivet BGC archives”: a collection of thousands of documents and photographs in binders and boxes collected over 116 years by individuals affiliated with Olivet. These archives are incomplete, yet they are also an incredibly rich cultural resource that enabled students to participate in constructing a history of Olivet and its children, families, and personnel. In addition, students spent hours at the Berks History Center, scouring newspapers.com and Google News Archives, speaking with Rich DeGroote and Jeffrey Palmer from Olivet, interviewing relatives of some of the Olivet individuals, and scouring neighborhoods in Reading to look for buildings.

Among the most important goals for the project were for students to understand that poverty has been a pervasive problem in the United States for centuries. Census data for the city of Reading in 2012 lists a population 13.2% black or African American, 58.2% Hispanic or Latino, and 28.7% white. The Olivet serves 3000-4000 children per year. 82% of these children live at or below the poverty level; 62% are Hispanic/Latino; 23% are African American; 6% are multi-racial; and 9% are white. 59% are male and 41% are female. But in Olivet’s first three decades of existence, census data for the city of Reading indicates a population that was 99% white, 0.9% black, and less than 1/10 of 1% for all other races. Our students learned that while demographics change, too many families, children, and adults in our society have lived and continue to live in poverty. As members of our local and national communities, we must help to solve this persistent problem and to provide financial security to all our neighbors.
Finally, it is vital to acknowledge that the content in this book was limited by time, space, cost, and access. All chapters were written by undergraduate students—not professional historians—within the span of one semester in a course that included a great deal of other assignments. The students made every effort to represent the historical evidence accurately and objectively. Any inaccuracies are entirely unintended. We are aware that much of Olivet’s history has been left out of this book, but we hope the book is the stepping stone of further documentation and preservation of this history. This book is a history, not the history, of Olivet.

Many people put forth great effort to support a project such as this. My thanks go to

- Kimberly Brown, Vicky Heffner, and Lisa Adams from the Berks History Center for assisting students with their research.
- Cassandra Yatron for her tireless enthusiasm and assistance.
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- Emily Pfender for her service learning leadership support.
- The Penn State Berks Center for Service Learning and Community-Based Research.
- Dr. Paul Esqueda, Sr. Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, Penn State Berks, who had the idea to write a history of Olivet.
- Dr. R. Keith Hillkirk, Chancellor, Penn State Berks, for his support.

Special, special thanks go to

- Richard DeGroote, for his enthusiasm and knowledge and the amount of time he spent with students to assist in their research. DeGroote has worked for the Olivet Boys & Girls Club for the past 26 years. Prior to joining the club staff he worked with the City of Reading Bureau of Recreation for 9 years. He is a native of Ontario, NY and a graduate of SUNY Brockport with a degree in Recreation Management.

In his tenure with the Olivet organization he has served in various capacities ranging from Club Director, Assistant Executive Director to Director of Development. He currently oversees the 21st CCLC Program, an after school program operated with the Reading School District. DeGroote is a past winner of the Northeast Region Professional of the Year and in 2014 received the National Service to Youth Award for 25 years of service from BCGA.

- Jeffrey M. Palmer, for his enthusiasm and knowledge and the amount of time he spent with students to assist in their research. Palmer retired in 2014 after a 42-year career with Olivet, including CEO and president since 1977. Palmer joined the Olivet as a member in 1965. He became a counselor in the summers of 1966, 1967 and 1968, and was hired full-time in 1973 while still a senior in college at West Chester University.

Among his most important accomplishments is leading Olivet from serving 900 boys at two locations to serving 4,000 boys and girls at eight clubs in Berks County and Pottstown and Blue Mountain Camp in Hamburg. Palmer received the “Administrator of the Year” Award for the Northeast Region of Boys & Girls
Club of America in 1996.

Funding for this project was provided by the Elsa L. and John W. Bowman Curriculum Endowment “To provide financial assistance to faculty and staff for curriculum development and enhancement of academic programs at Penn State Berks.”

Thank you to these generous donors.
Student Introduction

by Emily Pfender

Through research, oral interviews, photographs and historical documents, students at Pennsylvania State University, Berks College assembled the history of the Olivet Boys and Girls Club in Reading Pennsylvania. The Club has served Reading’s youth since 1898 and continues to guide youngsters through the various life obstacles that they face. William McCormick began the club with a couple of young boys he found loitering on the street. He rented a hall in a nearby hotel and initially called the group “Boys Friendly Club.” At McCormick’s first meeting, 120 boys joined the club. As more members joined, McCormick made the club available to young boys at five different locations and initially called them the “Olivets.” Two of those clubs—Clinton Street and Mulberry Street—are in 2015 two of Olivet’s locations.

The Olivet Boys and Girls Club specifically worked to unify children at risk in Reading, regardless of race. The Olivet locations allowed for African Americans to experience typical everyday activities they normally would not be able to participate in. For example, African Americans were not allowed to swim in the only city pool located in Reading. In 1921, the club opened an Olivet Pool to African Americans and gave them a clean and safe place to swim (V. Spencer 2014). After students spoke with multiple black and white members of the Olivet Clubs in the 1950’s and 1960’s, they learned that no members had ever experienced or witnessed any discrimination at the club from other kids or staff members.

The Olivet Boys Club became a Boys & Girls Club in 1990, but the participation of female staff in the Club revealed that women’s involvement had always been a fundamental aspect in the club’s success. For example, Marilu Torres was Olivet’s first female Unit Director. Her leadership role at the Mulberry Street Club in the 1990’s played a key role in women’s involvement. Torres and other female staff kept spirits high and acted as motherly figures for the kids. Women like Rita Gehman allowed for the club to flourish due to the addition of her maternal influence and countless hours spent with the kids. Although she was the wife of a famous wrestler and often remembered as an afterthought due to the her husband’s strong influence at the club, she left a rich impact as a result of her contributions. Because information about Olivet’s female staff wasn’t documented or acknowledged in the past, students were able to show their respects to these key mentors through their efforts and research. With this collection of stories about the Olivet Boys and Girls Club, we can more fully understand the impact that the club had on the youth of Reading, Pennsylvania and appreciate the unification and acceptance of gender, culture and race as a whole.
Introduction by Richard DeGroote

In this edition of the history of the Olivet Boys & Girls Club we get to hear the club experience from those who experienced it. A wide spectrum of former club members was invited to speak about what the club meant to them. This gives us a valuable snapshot into the first hand history of the club.

Equally important is looking into many of the programs and activities that took place over the years at the club. There were groups, individuals and issues that helped to shape the fabric of the club as well as programs that gave the Olivet Club its identity over the past 117 years. These articles pay tribute to the hard workers and volunteers that served the club.

The history of some of the newer clubs and camp were also covered in a series of articles by the students. For many of us who were involved it gave us a chance to reflect on the road that the organization has traveled. We know where we’ve been and now we are poised to face future challenges.
Chapters
Introduction by Jeff Palmer, Retired President and CEO of The Olivet Boys and Girls Club

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The continuing history of The Olivet Boys and Girls Club focuses on reaching out to serve additional youth who needed the services the clubs offer. As part of the club’s strategic planning process it was felt that as the organization was in a good financial position and had great outcomes it was to time reach out to additional children in underserved area including public housing. This growth was supported by Boys & Girls Clubs of America through grants they acquired from the Department of Justice to start new clubs in the neediest areas of distressed cities. To accomplish our growth goals clubs were started in nontraditional sites such as elementary schools, community centers, etc.

Olivet was extremely successful in this endeavor serving thousands of additional children and offering programs within walking distance of almost every child in Reading in addition to offering much needed youth services in Pottstown’s most distressed neighborhood. As we move in to our next phase, the club has ambitious goals of doubling the number of youth served which we think will have a significant positive influence for the communities we serve. Our progress was the result of hard work and dedication by the staff and volunteers of the Olivet Boys & Girls Clubs as well as financial contributors. I hope our readers enjoy learning of our journey to change and save lives of those children who need us most.
Minstrel Shows at Olivet

By Laurie Grobman

Parts of this essay were originally printed in A History of the First Three Decades of the Olivet Boys & Girls Club, Reading, PA.

White minstrel shows (whites performing in blackface) were among the most popular forms of entertainment in both the north and south beginning in the 19th century and through part of the 20th century (Schroeder, 2010, 142). As evidenced in the Reading News-Times minstrel shows were popular and prolific throughout the Reading area at this time. Regrettably, white minstrel shows are part of the Olivet’s history, as indicated by BGC archives and in the Reading News-Times. An article from the Reading News-Times dates the first Olivet Minstrel show in 1912 (“Olivet Boys” 1912). Students documented the final Olivet minstrel show in 1966, after going several years without one (Olivet Old-Timers). However, former and longtime Olivet CEO Jeff Palmer feels strongly that

The minstrel shows were a small and I feel insignificant part of our long history. I was told they were started by the ladies auxiliary as a fundraiser back in the Al Jolson area who performed blackface on Broadway. The ladies still had minstrel type shows when I was a kid but they were a variety show and black face was no longer in vogue. The shows when I was a kid were performed once a year.

Historically, the Olivet was a safe space for individuals who may have otherwise been discriminated against in the community. Alumni recall how peripheral minstrel shows were. Minstrelry and blackface are complex phenomena, but the consensus among scholars today is that minstrel shows and blackface “pretend[ed] that slavery was amusing, right, and natural” (Lott 1992, 23) and, as a result, was used by pro-slavery advocates to justify slavery. Furthermore, as Patricia R. Schroeder, Professor of English and Coordinator of American Studies at Ursinus College in Pennsylvania, asserts,

The widespread popularity of these characters throughout the nineteenth century ensured that stage depictions of African Americans, which were actually caricatures of blackness performed by white men, had little to do with black culture or actual black experience. Through their performances, however, white minstrels in blackface created a socially accepted definition of race, scripting racial difference as inferiority. (2010, 142)

In other words, minstrelry and blackface misrepresented African Americans, and these misrepresentations
influenced many Americans’ (mis)understanding of African Americans, especially those who had little actual experience and contact with black people. Furthermore, minstrelry and blackface generated and perpetuated egregious misconceptions and stereotypes about African Americans that linger still today.

My message for everyone who reads this book is almost cliché, but we must learn from the past by acknowledging truthfully the past. I also made the editorial decision to remove all discussions of minstrel shows and blackface in the student-authored articles in the book. I am not trying to hide nor censor history, although I am sure many people will disagree with my decision. I had discussions with Olivet personnel about this issue, and students and I discussed it at length. My choice to include again in Book 2 this essay about minstrelry and blackface history as a separate topic from the other articles in this book is to be sensitive to African American readers, especially children and youth. It’s really that simple. Words can hurt. Images can hurt. History can hurt. If nothing else, these are lessons that I as a multicultural educator want my students to take away from my classes. There is much to learn about our nation’s past.

In the pages of this book, readers will find that from its origins, Olivet Boys Club (and later, Boys & Girls Club), cared about, supported, and nurtured children at risk. Today, the Olivet organization cares deeply about all children, and those involved would never intentionally insult, offend, or make fun of children of color.

References


Further Reading

An Overview of Olivet's History

by Cassandra Yatron

William “Mac” McCormick, a successful journalist and entrepreneur, founded Olivet Boys Club in 1898 in order to give boys a safe place to be children. During the Industrial Revolution, Reading became a crucial center for steel and iron products, factories, and railroads, which required many workers. Parents were working long hours in the factories, and at a young age, children started joining them in the workforce. This was the beginning of the Boys Club movement in the United States, and the Olivet Club was one of the first 50 clubs to join the Boys Club of America. McCormick wanted to give the working boys a place to play and avoid the dangers of the streets like drinking and smoking. The Club moved 23 times in 32 to different locations throughout Reading. With donations William Luden, another wealthy entrepreneur in Reading, McCormick opened five clubs in the city where boys could pay five cents to join the club. Any boy could join the club regardless of race, and with the changing demographic of the city in the 50s and 60s, the demographic of the club changed as more African Americans moved into Reading.

The Clinton Street Club, which is still standing today, was the first building constructed for the club, and as such, it is called Club No. 1. It offered reading room, bowling alleys, pool tables, gymnasium/auditorium, stage, cooking area, outside playground, and an outdoor pool, which was the largest in Pennsylvania at the time. The second club was located in West Reading in an abandoned movie theatre. Called the Otto Boys Club after its director, this club was appreciated in the neighborhood with its gymnasium, basketball court, and activities for boys, girls, and adults. The third club was donated to Olivet by Reverend W.F. Klein and located by Pendora Park. Sports was also prevalent in this club as well as the other. The Mulberry Street Club, or Club No. 4, was converted to a club from a movie theatre and a blacksmith’s shop and is still standing today. This was the only self-sufficient Olivet Club. Opened in 1921, the fifth club was in Shillington and was short-lived. When McCormick died suddenly in 1923, only Club No. 1 and No. 4 stayed open with the help of the Luden family, and Olivet did not start expanding again until the 1990s with the opening of Oakbrook. Until the 1990s, Olivet alumni participated in the Old Timers where they received newsletter from the club and met every year for a dinner.

Sports were essential to the clubs, especially basketball, baseball, wrestling, swimming, and track. While these were almost exclusively for boys, although girls were occasionally allowed to use the pool when the boys were away, there were clubs for girls in the early years. Girls could join the Girls’ Club, the Working Girls Club, and the Junior Girls’ Club where they could play games, dance, craft, and socialize, although the girls’ clubs did struggle to find places to meet. The women in the community were active in Mother’s Club until 1929 when the Ladies Auxiliary was formed by Gertrude Moyer. From the club’s beginning, women volunteered to teach class, run the kindergarten, run clubs, and organize the gardens at Olivet, and eventually women became paid staff in the 1980s and joined the Board of Directors around 1990. Throughout the years, girls were not allowed to join the club, but they attended some co-ed events and became informal members of the club. In 1990, the name changed to Olivet Boys & Girls Club, and girls were able to join the club as official members.
Female Staff of the Olivet Boys Club, 1900-1920

(with concentration on Mrs. Hagy, Miss Wells, and Mrs. Yoder)

By Natasha O’Brien and Jakobi Dewasse

The female staff of the Olivet Boys’ Club, particularly the women we researched for this published history, provided the club and its members the driving force and motivation to push the club in different directions, as well as achieve successes in which the children took great pride. Although there is no mention that we could find of these women being paid staff of the club, they undoubtedly served as a strong backbone to this still thriving chapter of the Boys and Girls Clubs of America. Approximately 83 years before Olivet decided to change its name to acknowledge that it was a place for girls as well as boys, Mrs. S.R. Hagy was associated with what was known as the Working Girls’ Club. Much like the activities that the Boys Club was known for, the Working Girls’ Club consisted of young girls playing sports, particularly basketball and tennis, learning “physical culture,” singing, reading, gardening, and even learning mandolin and guitar, hospital work, dressmaking, and dressing up dolls for poor children (O.B.C. Record, October 1907).

Mrs. Hagy and Miss Margaret Wells were also known for their extensive work with the Gardening Club, where they guided the children in their work and encouraged them to take pride in the results. In a note written by the two women, there was to be a meeting on Thursday, September 27th (year unknown), held at the Olivet Boys Club, with plans to discuss what the Gardening Club had accomplished that summer, plans for the next summer with suggestions and hints from what they had learned from this one, and provisions of prizes and refreshments for the hard-working children. The women and children of the Gardening Club tended to 82 garden plots that summer (Note from Hagy and Wells, year unknown). In May 1909, Miss Wells was reported to have been the driving force behind the children’s gardens, along with mention of Mrs. Yoder being in charge of Section 2 of the gardens in a report of the O.B.C. Record (at one time, this was the newsletter of Olivet). In an earlier publication of the O.B.C. Record, Mrs. Hagy is named as being in charge of keeping total of the crop yield from the Olivet gardens. “Mrs. Hagy spent a day and a couple of nights in figuring out the total of the crops.” Names of the women and children who helped with the gardens placed on them and badges were given out as recognition of their accomplishment (October 1907).

The start of a new season for the Mickle Muckle Club (for boys only), known as the M.M. Club, in March 1909 saw Mrs. Yoder and Mr. Hesser put in charge of the club for this year. New officers were elected to replace the previous ones that had served until January 1909. Starting a new tradition this year the club decided to begin handing out signature blue and gold badges labeled with letters “M.M.” Members who attended on a regular basis for at least six weeks and were able to recite the club prayer became eligible to receive one of the badges (“The M.M. Club” 1909). With the club now totaling 50 members, the M.M. boys had a cake and candy sale at the Neighborhood House on April 24, 1909. Organized by one of the leaders of the club, Mr. Yoder, the boys managed to make about $15.05 from the sale. Mrs. Yoder later thanked the community on behalf of the club for helping to make the endeavor successful (“The M.M. Club’s Sale” 1909). On May 21, 1909, the M.M. club hosted a banquet that was free for the boys of the M.M. Club. Mrs.
Yoder and her husband hosted the banquet at a neighborhood house and had the room decked out in the club colors of blue and gold. The boys gave speeches, sang songs and ate ice cream as part of the festivities. To conclude the event the boys gave a special thank you to Mrs. Yoder for planning the banquet (“The M.M. Banquet” 1909).

Much of the organization and activities with the children didn’t happen through single volunteers or random acts of kindness. These women created and led committees and clubs of their own, most notably the Olivet Mothers’ Club. There are two Mothers’ Clubs that came up in research quite often (Clubs No.1 and No. 4), but Olivet Mothers’ Club No. 1 is of most interest here because the date at which Mrs. Hagy founded the club is uncertain (“Mothers Club Anniversary” 1922). In an earlier publication in The Reading Times, the Olivet Mothers’ Club No. 1 was said to have been founded in 1904 (“Social” 1919), but in the article about the anniversary of the club, nobody seemed to know exactly how long it had been around, “but it is easily 15 [years ago]” (“Mothers Club Anniversary” 1922). The ladies associated with this group had been meeting weekly, without fail, since the Boys’ Club was located in Lauer’s Park. This article shed a lot of light on the purpose of the services provided by Mrs. Hagy and the Working Girls’ Club, and perhaps this matched the purpose felt by the many other women who donated their time and dedication to Olivet’s cause. Hagy stressed “the need of doing something for the girls of 12 and 13, which she regarded as the most dangerous of all ages. It is these…girls who at that age had their first experience with evil living” (“Mothers Club Anniversary” 1922).

The Mothers’ Club, and the women associated with it, accomplished a lot in their time working with the Olivet Boys’ Club and the Working Girls’ Club, and there was even a mention of Miss Wells conducting a Junior Girls’ Club. It seems as though they never missed an opportunity to hold a dinner or a banquet to raise funds for the Club, and they had countless ideas for having the children spend their time productively and happily. In an article in the Reading Times, published December 1923, there is the announcement of a banquet to be held in appreciation of the Mothers’ Club “of both clubs 1 and 4. The banquet was held at the expense of the Ludens and was given for the mothers “as a token of appreciation for the years of helpful assistance rendered in the conduct of club festivals, suppers, and banquets” (“Ludens” 1923). Gratitude for the time and services of these giving individuals abounded, particularly noted in their club’s anniversary article in the Reading Times: “This Mothers’ Club [club No.1], never large in numbers, has been one of the most efficient working bodies in the long life of the Olivet Boys’ Club” (“Mothers Club Anniversary” 1922).

Perhaps the greatest feat of the Olivet Mothers’ Club was obtaining their two meeting rooms in what became affectionately known as the Neighborhood House. The women of the Mothers’ Club arranged to rent two rooms from Mr. Howard Meyers on 611 Eisenbrown Street, and they had plenty of ideas of how to use them. A sample weekly schedule published in the O.B.C. Record in 1907 stated: “Tuesdays 8p.m. Mrs. Hagy teaches arithmetic class; Wednesday 2p.m. Mothers’ Club meeting [Mrs. Hagy is president]; Wednesday 4:15p.m. Children’s Club meets in the clubhouse. Miss Wells is a storyteller; Wednesday 7p.m. Mrs. Hagy teaches Bead class; Thursday 7:30p.m Miss Wells teaches Boys’ Shakespeare class at her home” (O.B.C. Record, December 1907). The women of the Mothers’ Club had the ambition and every intention of being completely responsible for this acquisition. ‘The Mothers’ Club is going to take the responsibility of raising
the money. The expense for rent and lighting and heat, etc., will not be less than $60 a year. The Mothers’ Club has not a dollar in its treasury now, but the club has lots of energy and hope, and its members have not any doubt that they will be able to pay for the place” (O.B.C. Record, December 1907). The Mothers’ Club ended in 1929 when Gertrude Moyer formed the Ladies Auxiliary for each club.

References


Note from Mrs. S.R. Hagy and Miss Margaret Wells. Year unknown. Olivet BGC Archives. Binder 30.


Dr. Margaret E. Wells and the Olivet Gardens

By Jasmine Graham

Dr. Margaret E. Wells, a Reading, Pennsylvania native and early playground worker was the founder of the Olivet Boys Club gardens in 1909. Her garden project as a new idea and looked at with doubt at the beginning (“A Good Start 1912). The gardens were a great source of income for the club and provided a great sense of unity within the community. The gardens became popular in Reading during the early 1920s and was eventually taken over by the Chamber of Commerce (“Reading Girl an Authoress” 1922). Dr. Wells directed and participated in many of the garden’s events, which included events like flower exhibitions and meetings for calculating the profits made from the gardens. Wells was regarded as “a leader in community work”, as she was the first person ever to organize children’s gardens. Wells also was known for promoting athletic programs for girls (“M.D Degree for Reading Woman” 1921).

Dr. Margaret E. Wells was the daughter of William Moore Wells and Margaret Elizabeth Ruth. She grew up with five siblings, two of whom died early on in Margaret’s life (“A Tree of Other’s Ancestors”).

Wells was a teacher in Reading before she received her doctorate from Columbia University (“M.D Degree for Reading Woman). Newspapers noted that she was likely the only woman with a doctorate in philosophy in the entire city of Reading (“Reading Girl An Authoress.”) She was also an author who received acclaim for her many books (“Reading Girl An Authoress”). One of her books, “How the Present Came from the Past”, was adopted by an elementary curriculum as a textbook (“Reading Girl An Authoress”). As of 1922, Wells had a position as a teacher in the Teacher’s College (“Reading Girl” 1922).

While Dr. Wells had great success in her academic work, her work for the community and the Olivet gardens was just as important. The Olivet gardens made a substantial amount of money. In 1921, the gardeners earned a total of 4,000 dollars altogether from the 373 plots that year. 140 dollars if the money went toward Olivet Club No.1 (“Olivet Farmers Hear Reports” 1921). [G1] But despite its earnings and popularity, the gardens were not accomplished without its problems. When Dr. Wells initially brought up the idea of the gardens back in 1908, it was “scoffed” at by many heads of schools (“M.D Degree for Reading Woman). The gardens also had a rough start location wise. It moved from its initial location at Club No. 1 on Clinton street to Mr. Baer’s lot which was one block north (“A Good Start”). Dr. Wells wanted the garden planted on the Barbey Commons, next to the fence of the Barbey Mansion (“A Good Start.) Although the owner first agreed, he changed his mind when he realized the gardens would prevent the circuses and medicine shows from camping on the commons during the summer (“A Good Start.) This setback highly discouraged Dr. Wells, and she was ready to give up (“A Good Start.”). Fortunately, she got an offer from the Reading Iron Company that loaned her it’s land for ten dollars a month (“A Good Start” 1921).

The gardens gave many young children their start at success while also giving them a sense of personal accomplishment. Leon Hoffmeister, a successful singer won many prizes for excellence in his gardening work. Mrs. C.G Yoder, also a gardener as a child, used her experience to later become the conductor of the
Chamber of Commerce community gardens (“A Good Start” 1921).

**References**


“A Tree of Other’s Ancestors.” *Ancestry.com*
The Olivet Gardens

By Diamond Roye

Group of gardeners in 1905

The Olivet Garden club was started under Miss Margaret E. Wells as a way for the club and the community to earn money and to grow flowers and food. The owner of the land agreed to lend the lot on Barbey Common previous years for gardening in exchange for 30 dollars for the season. However in 1921, the man that owned the property for the gardens thought that it would interfere with the rest of the activities for the summer, so they received help from the Reading Iron Company who leased them land on Mr. Baer’s property one block north of Club No. 1 for 10 dollars that season. (“A Good Start” 1921).

Once the gardens were started, adults and children were allowed to buy and plant seeds for 50 cents each. Margaret Wells was in charge of the children’s gardens. The members of the Fathers’ Club were in charge of protecting the gardens against possible invasion, but no one was promised protection against thieves. Gardeners sold vegetables and various plants during events in the summer (“Do You Want a Garden” 1921). At a meeting, the gardeners totaled the amount of crops for the season and the earned an average of 10 dollars per plot. Individual gardeners reported on their own crops, and in 1921 they raised 4,000 dollars in crops with 373 plots (“$10 Valuation Per Plot” 1921). In 1922, the value of the garden plots raised to 15 dollars a plot which was announced at a gathering of gardeners at Olivet Boys Club No. 1. That season they raised over 5,000 dollars. Cumulatively, after a stretch of 14 years of gardening, they raised over 50,000 dollars from crops (“Value of Olivet Crops” 1922).

Sometimes the flowers would be put on display at various locations. There was an exhibition with the Olivet
Garden flowers in Dive’s, Pomeroy’s, and Stewart’s basement. They showed marigolds, zinnias, alyssum, mignonette, and other flowers of that season from children’s and adults’ plots under the garden club directed by Miss Wells and Mrs. S.R. Hagy (“Flowers on Exhibition” 1906). They had a wind up basement party in the basement of the Olivet Church on October 10th with 150 people attending. They judged the various gardens, and the youngest prize winner was eight years old with the oldest turning 60. Then Reading Mayor Gerber made a speech and that night they raised 300 dollars from crops (“Do You Want a Garden?” Binder 7).

In 1923, the garden was closed because the club was unable to secure the land for the season (“War Gardens Pass” 1923). Even though the gardens came to an abrupt end, they were able to celebrate almost 15 years of supporting their community with beautiful flowers and plants as well as healthy vegetables.

1910 May Walk

References


Olivet Kindergarten

by Beth Scholl and Caitlin Walsh

Olivet Kindergarten March 1909

Free kindergartens for young children, although a new idea to the city of Reading in the early 1900s, was a concept that the Olivet Boys Club embraced. The Olivet free kindergarten program was the second of its kind in Reading around 1908, but the articles conflict with dates and names (Howe 1909). The Reading Free Kindergarten Association may not have considered Olivet part of their association because of its connection with the Boys Club, which makes research a bit difficult.

Kindergartens in America had been around since the late 1800s with mostly unmarried women leading the initiative (“Kindergarten Congress” 1898). The first identified dialogue about the establishment of a free kindergarten in Reading was in 1905 during a Board of Trustees meeting for Hope Rescue Mission. Several members of the Ladies Auxiliary, not the Ladies Auxiliary of Olivet, were advocating the idea and it was stated that a gifted woman was prepared to undertake the work. It was decided that the work for it would start in the new year; however, Reading would not see its first free kindergarten for several more years (“A Free Kindergarten” 1905). In a report written for the Reading Times by Carrie Hull, the apparent driving force behind the free kindergartens in Reading, it was reported that in 1907 the first kindergarten in Reading, located in a public school building was opened (“Charter for the Free Kindergarten” 1911).

Although there is some conflicting information on the exact date of the Olivet kindergarten’s opening we believe they were the second kindergarten to open as we found an article in The O.B.C Record, written by Miss Emma H. Howe, discussing the first kindergarten to open at Olivet. In the article she states that it was opened in October of 1908 in the Natatorium, on North 5th Street in Reading, PA. Howe writes that there were about 17 children in attendance for the opening and included songs and games on December 31st (Howe 1909). However, a later newspaper article records a different date and location saying it opened November 1st, 1909 at the Ricktown school (“Charter for the Free Kindergarten” 1911). Classes were held in the Natatorium until March 1, 1909, then moved to the Neighborhood House. The club was open for an
exhibition in March of 1909 and then following April 1st, the club was under the jurisdiction of the Kings Daughters of the Presbyterian Church. Anna Pike and Helen Miller helped with the kindergarten (Howe 1909).

In the following years, the kindergartens of Reading struggled to get funds. The Olivet kindergarten seemed to be removed from this struggle because William McCormick was alive during this time and privately funded Olivet with assistance from William Luden. During this time the free kindergartens of Reading were supported under the Reading Free Kindergarten Association with support from the Reading school board. In an article titled, 30 “Charter for the Free Kindergarten,” we read of a meeting that took place with the Free Kindergarten Association discussing their financial status. It was found from the treasurer, Miss Heckman, that the association did not have enough funds to keep the two kindergartens open through February 14, 1911, let alone pay Carrie Hull what she deserved. This article states that Mrs. Hull “is not only a trained kindergarten teacher but a woman of very unusual executive ability, energy and clarity of vision.” Mrs. Hull told the Board that she received an offer from another city with a raise, and she would leave Reading if she and her school would not receive funds. The Board believed that she was an asset to the city and agreed to raise her salary and increase funding for her kindergarten. The meeting resulted in aiming to get collectors out and secure more members of the association (“Charter for the Free Kindergarten” 1911).

In February of 1912, the Reading Free Kindergarten Association was in a much-improved position and was set to be chartered. With newly elected officers, an appointed board of directors, which included many women, and a constitution the association assured the existence of two free kindergartens for the rest of the year with the possibility of starting work for the following year (“To Charter Association” 1912). But by February 1913, the Reading Free Kindergarten Association was again in trouble. Miss Carrie Hull, now the general supervisor of the kindergartens, reported good attendance at a newly opened kindergarten in the Severn building, but the report of the treasurer, Miss Heckman, at the annual meeting showed only $58.08. It would take at least $1500 in order to conduct kindergarten to 1914. The free kindergartens in Reading were in danger of being discontinued unless the school board was able to come through with more funds. The article also quotes Wellington M. Bertolet, a member of the Reading school board, as saying “the time is not far off when the kindergarten will become part of the school system” and “members of the school board are not prone to give people what they need until the people show that they want that need supplied” (“Funds To Train Kiddies” 1913).

All four kindergartens worked to raise awareness about themselves when they hosted a play festival in the city park rink on June 7th 1913. 125 children attended and took part in songs, games, and dances under the direction of their teachers Miss Dorothy Johnston, Olivet’s previous kindergarten teacher Miss Emma Howe, Mrs. Carrie Hull, and Olivet’s most recent kindergarten teacher Miss Helen Burkey (“Play Festival” 1913). It seems as though Miss Howe left Olivet for another kindergarten and Miss Helen Burkey was her replacement. In an article titled “Forming Habits in Children,” stressed the importance of kindergarten education by expressing the importance of learning habits and conduct at an early age. She believes the play festival shows the positive impact of such things (Hull 1913). They continued to exhibit their proficiencies through kindergarten shows and were even successful in raising some funds for the Free Kindergarten
In June of 1915, the Reading School District adopted the kindergartens as part of the school system. Subsequently there was no longer a need for the Reading Free Kindergarten Association and they decided to disband (“Reading Kindergarten Association Disbands” 1915). Although short-lived, the Free Kindergarten Association did serve a great purpose. It enabled several intelligent and devoted women to champion for the education of young boys and girls, inspiring their communities to place value on learning. The fate of the Olivet kindergarten is unclear, but it might have become unnecessary after the merger with the Reading school system.

References


“Funds To Train Kiddies At Low EBB; Want Help.” 1913. *The Reading Times*, 1 February.


Women and girls were a part of the Olivet Boys Club from its founding, although they took a secondary role in the Boys Club. Through the various clubs, women and girls contributed their time to teaching, sewing, cooking, organizing events, and learning new skills.

The Sewing School started in 1906. It met at the Olivet Church on Saturdays at 2:00 p.m. and girl gardeners, sisters of the O.B.C. boys, and all playground girls were welcome to attend. They made quilts and other items for fundraising purposes, at one point selling a quilt to help buy a new building (“The Sewing School” 1907; “What We Do”).

The idea for a Working Girls’ Club was suggested by Miss Laura N. Platt, president of the Pennsylvania Association of Women, at a meeting of delegates from the State Federation of Women’s Clubs in Chester, PA on April 7, 1906. In a speech addressing women working in factories, Miss Platt suggested that a working girls’ clubs be formed and that women of other clubs reach out a helping hand to form them (“Factory Girl Morals” 1906). The Working Girls’ Club was formed in Lauer’s Park later that year, and the first meeting consisted of about twenty girls (“The Working Girls’ Club” 1907). Generally, Mondays at the clubhouse were for the Working Girls Club only, and they met at 7:00 p.m (“What We Do”). They exercised, played basketball, and were taught gym lessons (“The Working Girls’ Club” 1907). They also took part in different events with the help of the Mothers’ Club. In 1907, they learned how to make shirts and went to the Reading Hospital to learn how to bathe a patient, among other things (“Girls Club Doings”; “Moving Mothers’”). The girls also took part in caring for one of the gardens associated with Olivet at the time (“A Helpful Place” 1908; “Children’s Garden” 1909). Miss Lottie Lutz taught them mandolin and guitar lessons on Thursday nights at 7:00 p.m. (“What We Do;” “Excerpts from the O.B.C. Record 1907”). They dressed dolls for poor
children to receive on Christmas (“The Working Girls’ Club” 1907). The Olivet Boys and Girls Choir met on Saturdays at 6 p.m (“What We Do”). The girls also took part and performed in different musicals, shows, and even operettas, where they danced, played, acted, and sang. The documented performances include “All’s Fair in Love and War or Girls of ‘76,” “The Barbell Drill,” “Finnish Dance,” “The District School on Blueberry Hill,” and Gilbert and Sullivan’s operetta H.M.S. Pinafore (“Girls to Give a Play” 1909; “Successful Season Pleasingly Closed” 1909; “A Great Success” 1907; “Pinafore to be Repeated” 1909).

The Mothers’ Club consisted of mothers and friends interested in the work of the Olivet Clubs (“The Mothers’ Club” 1909). From what we could find, it began informally in the summer of 1906; they met once a week under the tents at the Olivet playground, and their meeting times consisted of reading scripture, singing and prayer, and occasional lunches. Outside of their meetings, the women sewed different items such as aprons, stocking bags, slippers, and sunbonnets (“The OBC Mothers’ Club” 1907). One evening, they held a supper at the old clubhouse, and another day, they held a lunch where they entertained gardeners and about 150 playground children (“The Working Girls’ Club” 1907). The mothers sold ice cream at the grand opening of the playground on June 5th, 1909 (“The Playground Opening” 1909). They held a picnic on July 4th, 1909 at Memorial Springs Park, and later that year for Labor Day, they held a picnic and made ground corn and apple roast (“‘Mothers’ Club” 1909). The Mothers’ Club also collaborated with the Working Girls’ Club to maintain a garden (“The OBC Mothers’ Club” 1907).

Around the turn of the nineteenth century, women and girls were involved with the Olivet Boys Club, without actually being a part of it.

Basket weaving Olivet Playground. Approximately 1910

References


Girls 1910-1949

by Meghan Zebertavage and Emily Dobrosky

City Park, 1909

Girls’ activities through 1910-1949 weren’t as highly publicized as the activities of the Boys Club because girls weren’t official members until 1990, though there were some mentions of girls. The Olivet archives and the Reading Times refer to three different groups: the Girls’ Club, the Working Girls’ Club, and the Junior Girls’ Club (“Dedication” 1910). The activities included in The Working Girls’ Club were folk dancing on Mondays, swimming and working girls drill on Tuesday, hammock-making on Thursdays, and folk-dancing and swimming were on Fridays. All these activities were held in different parts of the building which were separate from where the boys’ club activities were (“Bowling”). Some of the activities mentioned in the O.B.C. Record is that the girls were making shirt waists and going to the Reading Hospital to learn how to bathe a patient (Schell). These activities were exclusively for girls. We could not find any information about the Junior Girls’ Club.

The girls also participated in physical activities like half-mile runs for girls under fifteen (“School” 1914) and in marches and walks. The photo above shows girls marching at St. Joseph hospital in City Park (“Marching”). In the photo below are girls after they participated in the May Walk of 1910 (“May Walk” 1910).

Girls were also involved in plays. In the article “Girls to Give A Play” it was mentioned that Miss Newhard directed a play where the Working Girls’ Club was in the cast and the play was entitled “All’s Fair in Love and War, or the Girls of 76” (Miss Newhard).

One of the differences between the Boys Club and the girls’ clubs was that the girls typically had meetings or events at homes rather than at the club where the boys met. In one article, there was a mention that they didn’t have a place to meet, so the Girls’ Club ended up gathering at a woman’s house who was involved with the club (“Miss Frech Hostess” 1914).
It was noted that twelve girls in the Olivet Club had their membership fees paid to belong to the Y.W.C.A. (Young Women Christian Association) by William McCormick, Olivet founder. Some of the classes included dressmaking, millinery, cooking, first-aid, and language classes (“1204” 1914).

There was also surprising evidence that girls from the Olivet Club were involved with the funeral of Mary A. Fisher, daughter of Catherine Fisher. Six girls, who were the bearers, were mentioned as friends of Mary’s. It’s implied that Mary attended the club because the article said that her friends were from Olivet. The Olivet Girls’ Club also contributed roses to the service (“Funerals”1915).

References


There was no historical documentation available to us to show girls involvement in the Olivet Club in the 1950s. However there is more evidence in the early 1960s to the late 1970s of girls taking part in club activities. Even though the girls were not allowed to be members, it is unclear as to why or how they were allowed to participate in the club.

Minutes from a Board meeting from May 23, 1960 in Club No. 4 mention a motion that was accepted to not allow girls into the club and that Danny Trout, then-executive director, must enforce. As a result, Clubs No. 1 and No. 4 prohibited girls from entering the clubs except when the clubs were open to the public. Stanley Adams made the motion, and was seconded by George Miller. Members of the Board were all present including President Robert Cremer, his Vice President, the Treasurer, and the Secretary along with others on the Board of Directors (“Minute Meeting” 1960). Since Trout allowed girls to enter the club before this ruling, he seems to have supported girls’ participation in the club.

Two years later, a request made by the coach of the Girls Basketball team of Central Catholic High would
again involve the admittance of girls into the club. The coach of the girls’ basketball team requested to Danny Trout that the girls practice once per week on one of the basketball floors. But Stanley Adams reiterated the motion that was passed two years before. The Board decided not to permit the girls’ basketball team of Central Catholic High to practice at either Club No. 1 or No. 4 (“Minute Meeting” 1962).

In July 1964, an article printed in the Reading Eagle stated that the Red Cross began swimming lessons for both boys and girls at the Olivet pool. “How-to-swim” lessons were taught by Kristen Miller (of the Red Cross) to boys and girls. Boys who completed the lesson were rewarded with a certificate from Kristen, but whether girls received the same kind of recognition is unknown to us (“Red Cross” 1964). Girls were also allowed to use the pool when the boys were away at camp or on weekend mornings (Palmer 2014). The following year in October 1965, the Olivet Boys Club opted to allow a co-ed chorus to be added, and the boys got better at singing (“Program 1965”).

1970s

The early 1970s is when girls started to appear more frequently in the club. Towards the end of 1974 is when the distribution of monthly newsletter called Sooper Snooper began. The Snooper newsletters were monthly, fun gossip that the boys of the club would write under the supervision of Wally Briel. The Snooper also announced events, club activities, and pointed out some gossip about other boy club members (Palmer 2014). The October 1974 newsletter of the Snooper announced the first “Girl’s Night” that would be hosted in the following month. The October Snooper encouraged girls to bring their “girl friends” to the event to promote for a better turn out in numbers (“Girl’s Night” 1974). The November issue of the Snooper in same year admitted the girls into the club at a price of 50 cents per person at the Girl’s Night Event. The results of the Girls’ Night event was posted in the following Snooper newsletter, saying 34 girls attended and to “look out” for the next all-girls event. The newsletter thanked the girls for coming out and inviting their “mothers and lady friends” to the event (“Girls’ Night Results” 1974).
There is also evidence of girls present in the club during regular club hours and activities. In one photograph, girls are in the background watching boys participating in wrestling drills in Club No. 4 on Mulberry Street. Girls are seen in another photo playing pool in the game room and attending birthday parties at the Olivet. Girls also attended clubs such as crafts, knitting, and ceramics (Palmer 2014). There were also photographs depicting girls partaking in craft activities (“Girls in the Club”).

It was apparent that girls took part in club activities in the 1960s and 1970s even though they were not official members. Now in 2014, the Olivet Club has changed considerably as the name now reflects both boys and girls as being part of the club.

Approximately 1971

References


The Ladies Auxiliary of Club No. 1

by Jami Grunmeier and Madison Lawson

Club No. 1 of the Olivet Boys Club was located on Clinton Street and served as a place of learning and recreation. It also served as a place for women to contribute to the club as well as benefit from it during the early 1900s to present day. The records on the “Olivet Timeline” show that the Ladies Auxiliary was formed in 1929 by Gertrude Moyer, but we have found reference to a Ladies Auxiliary in the early 1920s before their official formation.

The women held recreational activities, such as at 1921 Club Camp Picnic when the ladies enjoyed a “delightful supper . . . ball games, cake walk and numerous other games and then dancing until 9:30” (“Picnic at Club” 1921). They also held activities that allowed them leisure times; for example, in 1922, “At a meeting of the Ladies Auxiliary of Olivet club No. 1 it was decided to spend a week at Olivet cottage, at Stone Harbor, in July (“Week at Seashore” 1922). In May of 1929 the Ladies Auxiliary Club No.1 was entertained at a banquet held at Club No.1 to show gratitude for their services to the Boys Club (“Services to Honor Boys Club Founder” 1929).

Many of the mothers of the boys in the club joined in the Ladies Auxiliary to raise funds, such as in June of 1967 when the Ladies Auxiliary “held a card party which brought in the equivalent of 94 books.” This was a huge success for both the Olivet Club and the Ladies Auxiliary: “As you can easily see this was the biggest step we made so far” (Olivet Old Timer 1967). The ladies were almost always dedicating their time in the club to helping the boys as well as raising money and awareness for the club.

In March of 1968, it was announced that “Club No. 1 is making Easter eggs, having soup sales, rummage sales and other activities” (Olivet Old Timer 1967). In 1933, the Ladies Auxiliary held a bazaar in the club gym (Reading Times, 1933). To keep the community engaged and to keep attendance high at the club, the Ladies Auxiliary held and hosted many different events.

These events also helped to engage the clubs themselves; both clubs “will have very active Ladies Auxiliaries that will conduct many special activities for their members” (Olivet Old-Timer 1967). Taken together, the articles found in the Reading Eagle on the Ladies Auxiliary suggest that the Auxiliary held a variety of block parties, Christmas events, dinners, and bingo games in order to bring the Reading community closer to the Clubs. At the annual Old Timers banquet they were the planners, preparers, servers, and sometimes entertainers for the dinner itself. Every April for many years (we are unable to identify when it ended), Ladies Auxiliary of Club 1 cooked and served the annual dinner for the entire Olivet Boys Club. The Ladies Auxiliary clearly was an integral part of Olivet that raised money and provided assistance to keep the club functioning and helping boys.

References


The Ladies Auxiliary of Club No. 4

by Catherine Nguyen, Jade Rodriguez, and Karina Lovera

Ladies Auxiliary Club No. 4 was founded 1928 after the Mothers’ Club ended. This Ladies Auxiliary was part of the Mulberry Street Club. The Ladies Auxiliary was involved in the Olivet Club and their community. According to many documents in the Olivet BGC archives, the women hosted and provided entertainment at banquets and block parties for the public. They made and sold their own candy and planned events, such as winter programs where they sold sandwiches and Christmas wreaths while serving food during the holiday season. They kept their spirits up and alive with their daily prayers. They were mother figures and role models for the children.

The Olivet Club held the Annual Old Timers Banquet on Clinton St in Reading, and the Ladies always cooked and served dinner. In 1946, according to a pamphlet, the dinner was served for twelve dollars a plate. They occasionally provided entertainment such as music, shows, and acts (“Old Timers Banquet”). The Ladies Auxiliary Club also prepared and served food at the Annual Mulberry Street Award Banquet. They helped planned programs such as Open Houses for Club No. 4. They would normally provide refreshments for the guests. (“Program Planned By Club”).

The Ladies Auxiliary was involved in planning fall activities. They fundraised money for many events and activities such as dances for the public. The Ladies Auxiliary Club No. 4 sponsored a trip to Philadelphia for 120 Olivet Little League baseball players. The women chaperoned different trips. They accompanied the boys on their trips. (“Olivet Boys Club to Mark 55th Anniversary”).

The Ladies Auxiliary Club carefully recorded its funds. They kept records of the money that was spent to repair and maintain the club, and the money that they used for activities. They were responsible for their own accounts.

There were many notable women throughout the many years since the club was established, including Mrs. Zimmerman and Mrs. Griesemer played a big role in the Ladies Auxiliary throughout the years.¹

The Ladies Auxiliary Club No. 4 helped make it possible for the Olivet to keep running smoothly throughout the years. They were highly respected in the club and in their community. They received numerous awards for their hard work and dedication. They were awarded with a certificate of recognition for all their hard work in 1972 which was presented by United Way of Berks County (“Certificate of Appreciation”).

Note

  1. We were unable to locate these women’s first names

References
“Joined the Mothers Club of Olivet.” 1922 Olivet BGC Archives.


“Formed Ladies Auxiliary of the Olivet Boys Club and served as President for 26 years.” 1929. Olivet BGC Archives.


“Olivet No. 4 Participants are Honored.” Newspaper. OBC Archives. Binder 43.


“Received Olivet Award for Service.” 1959. Olivet BGC Archives.

“Received Ladies Auxiliary Award for service. 1960. Olivet BGC Archives.
Female Staff and Volunteers*

by Elizabeth Kemmerer, Lauren Kuhn, and Alexandra Kummerer

*This article includes female staff and volunteers who were not written about in other chapters in this collection.

One of the first acknowledgements of female staff or volunteers appears in an article posted in the Reading Times on March 13, 1914; the “ladies of the club” are recognized for serving a turkey dinner in the banquet hall at the club’s 12th annual banquet (“Pinchot Shares” 1914). As was in many of the newspaper articles of the time, the women were not specifically mentioned by name.

On February 29, 1936, Mrs. Annie D. Zechman was recognized in the Reading Times for being involved in the community. She was a singer and pianist at many of the club gatherings. As a young girl, she also took part in musical affairs sponsored by William McCormick, who was the Olivet Boys Club founder (“Vets Ask City” 1936). Louise Benedict and Anna Sandman are mentioned in an Olivet report from 1959. Benedict is credited with working in the gym and Sandman is credited with working in ceramics (“Annual Report” 1959). It is not mentioned whether these women were employees or volunteers.

Mrs. Donald R. Sittaro was helping Ralph O. Bigony examine books at Club No. 1 in a picture from the Reading Times in October of 1963. It was unclear whether she was employed or a volunteer, and there was no other mention of her that we could find connected with the Olivet Clubs.

Pictures from July, 1964 in the Reading Eagle show Red Cross Volunteer Kirsten Miller helping boys and girls learn to swim. These “learn-to-swim” classes were held at the Olivet Boys Club and sponsored through the Red Cross. The swim classes were open to boys and girls (“Red Cross” 1964).

An article from November 2, 1968, “$78 Collected for UNICEF,” recognizes Mrs. Thomas Dallesandro, who was the director of Keystone Club of Olivet Boys Club. The Keystone Club, which is still currently running, is a community service club.

Olivet Club No. 4 had a hand-written newsletter called the Sooper Snooper, which discussed anything from upcoming club events to whatever rumors circulated throughout the club. In an edition released on October 31, 1974, there was a list of activities and instructors. Among that list, two instructors were female: Mrs. Fern Dewald, in charge of Boys and Ladies Ceramics, and Mrs. Jane Palmer, in charge of Arts and Crafts, Book Club, and Quiet Games. Mrs. Jane Palmer, also the wife of club director Jeff Palmer, was a volunteer at the club until her children were born (Reed). She then became an elementary school teacher and, now retired, volunteers at the Olivet Boys and Girls Clubs by running the “Bookworms” program; one of the authors of this paper currently works at the PAL Olivet Club and has casually spoken with Mrs. Palmer about her former occupation as well as her volunteer work today.
The Olivet Boys Club began hosting after-school tutoring sessions at Club No. 4 in 1989. Volunteer teachers from local schools came to help boys and girls. The article from the Reading Eagle/Times in 1990 entitled “City’s Homework Centers Cited by National Journal” speaks of Sharon McLendon, a teacher from Glenside Elementary, who volunteered at this after-school homework program (Mahon 1990). Dr. Melissa Jamula from the Reading School District spearheaded the program (DeGroote 2014). In a March 1991 “Old Timers” newsletter, Ruth Steinrock was announced to be retiring after 14 years of dedicated service as secretary for the organization. Marilu Torres was Olivet’s first female Unit Director, taking on leadership of the Mulberry Street Club in the 1990s.

Information about female workers and volunteers within the Olivet organization is extremely scarce. Women may be mentioned in connection with the organization but usually only briefly, and many pictures found didn’t include captions. Also, if they were mentioned in newspaper articles, it usually wasn’t with their first name; instead, women were known by their husbands’ names—for example, Mrs. Donald R. Sittaro. Out of respect for these women and for historical accuracy, efforts were made to find their first names, but it wasn’t always possible. Even so, female staff and volunteers of the Olivet organization in the past receive more recognition now than they may have before. In addition, women are much more likely to not only volunteer and be employed by the Olivet Boys & Girls Club today, but also be recognized for their actions.

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“Community Service.” Olivet Boys & Girls Club. olivetbgc.org.


“Vets Ask City for Old Jail Site as Center.” Reading Times. February 29, 1936.
Rita Franckowiak Gehman was born in 1927, only seven years after women’s long history of disenfranchisement came to an end (“1940 United States Federal Census”). In a context of many women voting for the first time, Rita raised the bar for what being an active woman in the community meant. Her engagement with the community would serve as a testament to Rita’s dedication to upholding her civic responsibility.

Growing up in Berks County Pennsylvania, Rita was known by her maiden name, Franckowiak (“1930 United States Federal Census”). She was Polish, an identity she inherited from her mother. Rita got married in 1950. Preparing for her wedding on January 28th 1950, her sisters, identified in the newspaper article only by their husbands’ last names, Mrs. Samuel Spadafora, Mrs. James Carroll and Mrs. Ralph Stehman, threw her an elaborate shower (“Rita Franckowiak Honored at Shower” 1950). While the event proved “dazzling” enough to be covered by the local paper, focus was limited to the much acclaimed centerpiece, an umbrella (“Rita Franckowiak Honored at Shower” 1950). The press neglected to write much about the soon-to-be bride.

Rita’s husband, Marvin Gehman, became involved as an Athletic Director with the Olivet Boys Club following the marriage (Boyer 2014). This led to Rita’s own personal involvement and enhancement of the Club. She was a ceramic arts and crafts instructor in the mid 1960s (“Rita Teaching Art Class”).

In images of her work at the Olivet, Rita is frequently seen helping dozens of young boys with crafts and art activities (“Rita Working with Kids”).
In a club that was formally known for its sports and athletic programs, Rita offered her vision for a better-rounded curriculum by engaging the boys in domestic arts. Rita helped facilitate many talent shows at the Club as well. Rita incorporated her creative inclinations as well as her resourcefulness in one particular initiative. It was called the “Bash with Trash,” and in it, she challenged the boys to create functional objects out of otherwise recyclable materials (“Wasteful Thinking”). The boys made candy holders, wastebaskets and mosaic wall plaques out of things like rug remnants and plastic bleach bottles. It was an activity that received recognition from the community, as several boys were honored with three state contests that they won (“Wasteful Thinking”). More importantly, the activity was one that challenged and subverted the perceptions of what it meant to be a boy. Boys learned they could receive praise and a sense of accomplishment, from an activity that required skills that were traditionally thought of as domestic.

According to Kevin Devera, the Impact Director of Health, Wellness, & Athletics, Rita was a maternal figure for the Olivet Club, an institution mainly aimed at helping underprivileged and low income youth. In many cases, the boys involved in the organization may not have had their own mothers at home. But at the Club, the boys had Rita. Rita herself was a mother to two boys, Rorey and his younger brother Dwayne. Rita was a dedicated mother, and she brought her son Dwayne to the Olivet with her (Devera 2014).

Rita and her husband purchased a Christmas tree farm in Rockland Township (Palmer 2014). During the 60s, her husband brought boys to the farm to help cut down the trees. The trees were then brought to the Olivet Club, where Rita helped sell them at the Annual Christmas Bazaar (Boyer 2014). This was an event where
boys could come with 5 cents and leave with dozens of presents for their families during the holiday season (Devera 2014).

The Olivet Boys Club became a Boys & Girls Club in 1990, but Rita’s participation in the Club marked that women’s involvement had always been a fundamental force in the club’s success. While researching Rita Gehman we learned that she was often remembered as an afterthought following the grandiose accomplishments of her husband. Being that her husband was such a strong influence at the Club, it was difficult to find as much information on Rita. However, through our dedication to finding out information about who the real Rita Gehman was, we learned that she was not just a wife of a famous wrestler, but also a mother and a fundamental cog in the machine that was the Olivet. Rita’s dedication to the Club is evident in the time and effort she put into being involved in it and her resounding impact is a result of her unique contributions to the organization.

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Moyer, Dewald, and Lebo Women

by Mallory Barr and Taylor DeLisle

Stewart “Spike” Moyer is a well-known name in Olivet history (see article about him in *A History of the First Three Decades of the Olivet Boys & Girls Club*). Lesser documented are the many women of Spike Moyer’s family also involved in the club throughout the years and continuing today. According to Michael R. Moyer, Spike’s son, the women from his family who participated in Olivet club are as follows: Michael Moyer’s grandmother and Spike’s mother, Gertrude Moyer (deceased); Michael’s mother and Spike’s wife, Marie Moyer (deceased); Michael’s aunt and Spike’s sister, Fern DeWald (98 years old); Michael’s aunt and Spike’s sister, Bernice Lebo, 86 years old (Email from Professor Mike Moyer to Professor Laurie Grobman 2014).

These women have long been involved with Olivet, especially through fundraisers and the Auxiliary clubs, which was founded by Gertrude Moyer. At nearly any time throughout the day Gertrude could be found at the club, working with the children and helping to raise money for the club as a whole. Bernice Lebo, who is one of the only surviving family members, to this day can be found at the club making and selling candy to raise money during the month of November as part of the Ladies Auxiliary. She received an award from the Olivet club on April 16, 1961 when she was presented a plaque for her years of hard work and dedication.

Fern DeWald also played a huge role in fundraising, and she was involved in dinners, musicals, and the Ladies Auxiliary Club. In 2006, Fern DeWald received an award from the Boys and Girls Club of America, “with seven diamonds representing the seven decades that she has been serving Olivet Boys and Girls Club as a member or officer of the Ladies Auxiliary” (“100 Years”).

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Rose DeNunzio

by Amber McCarthy and Sarah Hallman

Rose DeNunzio, or Mrs. D as the children called her, dedicated her life to helping children (“A Labor of Love” 2014). Rose was born in Coatesville, Pennsylvania on July 22, 1935 (“Olivet Using Clubs to Beat the Streets” 1990). She obtained a Bachelor of Science Degree in Art Education from Kutztown University and taught in the Kutztown School District, and one of her students there was Keith Haring. Afterwards, she obtained the position of Informal Education Director at the Olivet Boys and Girls Club where she was instrumental in developing the progress of the Clinton Street Club in 2004. Throughout her career she touched the lives of many young people. Rose was part of the female staff when the Club was entirely male and witnessed the transition of the Olivet Boys Club to the Olivet Boys and Girls Club (Devera 2014). She was a genuine person who approached her students with a “grandmotherly touch.” (“A Labor of Love” 2014).

Rose was well-known for capturing imagination while working with children (“A Labor of Love” 2004). In the 1980s, she started the reading program at Olivet (Devera 2014). She enjoyed helping out in the homework center and helping children understand concepts better (“Olivet Using Clubs” 1990). Rose tried her best to make learning interesting for the children and put extra effort into encouraging the boys to read. Rose once stated, “I hate to sound sexist, but most boys haven’t been turned onto reading. And it’s because they are so physically active. They’d rather bounce a basketball. You’ve got to make reading interesting” (“Club Strengthens Minds”).

Not only did Rose help students with reading and homework, but she oversaw the art program at Clubs No.1 and No. 4. Since her background was in art, Rose wanted to give the students an opportunity to use their imagination and make ceramic pieces at a low cost which they could afford, so she embraced the ceramics program at Olivet. She loved her job working with children and running the ceramics program. The students really enjoyed it also and ceramics program thrived for many years until Rose retired. Without Rose, the program began to slowly diminish. During her years at Olivet, she also taught popular cooking classes and published a cookbook for Boys & Girls Clubs of America. Rose was involved as well with the Stamp Club and teaching boys and girls to play chess. The BGCA recognized Rose’s dedication to the boys and girls by giving her the BGCA Service to Youth Award in 1998, which she received at the 100th Anniversary Dinner. (Devera 2014). A few years later, Rose celebrated her 25th year with the Olivet Boys & Girls Club in 2004 as one of the most admired and respected staff (“A Labor of Love” 2004).

Rose DeNunzio passed away peacefully at her residence, two days before her 78th birthday, on July 20th 2012, due to brain cancer (“Olivet Using Clubs” 1990). Some people tried to carry on her tradition by keeping the ceramics program running, but unfortunately, their efforts were not successful. A member of the Foster Grandparents Program who oversaw the reading programs at Clinton and Oakbrook, Mr. Jimmy Oliver, transferred to the Oakbrook Unit and created the “Rose DeNunzio Memorial Library” at that site to honor Rose. He continues to teach and help kids read in 2015 at the Oakbrook Unit (Devera 2014). Rose
made a lasting impact on many of the children she worked with and will hold a special place in their memories that will last a lifetime (“A Labor of Love” 2004).

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Women on Board of Directors

by Jordyn Yeager and Amanda Gerber

During most of Olivet’s years of operation, the Board of Directors only consisted of men as far as we have documented. The earliest documented women on the board include Martha Hafer (1992), Barbara Kline (date not officially determined), and Peg Gill (1997). The organization’s 1998 annual report also lists Nancy Giles, Beverly Hall, Sharon Kemmerer, Mary Orlando, and Ramona Turpin as members of the board. We believe that the first woman to be on the Board of Directors was Barbara Kline based on the research we have done looking through articles from the Reading Eagle1 (“Olivet” 1992). After speaking to Martha Hafer, who stated she was not the first woman on the board, we deduced that Barbara was the earliest woman on the board, since the 1992 Reading Eagle article names her as a Board member (“Olivet” 1992). However, the Olivet Boys & Girls Club could not provide us with records of this information during the time span of our assignment, but they may have the records somewhere (see below for the list of women Board members since 2004). Kline participated in charitable work and was an active community volunteer (Gill 2014). Barbara Kline and her husband, Sid Kline, Jr., were Olivet Champions of Youth in 1995.

Hafer became a member of the board around the year 1992. She was instrumental in starting the Kiss a Pig campaign, which was first held in 1993. She was also the Resource Development Chair for the Olivet Board. Through this role she raised large amounts of money with the Kiss-a-Pig campaign and the Steak and Burger Dinner (Hafer 2014).

The first African American woman on the Board of Directors was Ramona Turpin (Turpin 2014). Turpin was a member of the Board twice, once before the PAL merger and then again after the merger. Ramona was also a Kiss-A-Pig candidate and she managed two KAP campaigns (Turpin 2014).

Margaret “Peg” Gill was the first woman Chairperson of the Board. (see article in this book on Gill).

Note

1. Shortly before we began our research, Barbara Kline’s husband, Sidney Kline, Jr., passed away. We chose not to contact Barbara Kline for information about her role on the Olivet Board during her time of mourning. Barbra Kline’s father-in-law, Sid Kline, Sr., was the first recipient of the Olivet Champion of Youth Award in 1990.

References

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*Note: Our professor received the following information about women on the Board since 2004 from Kristin Eck, Executive Assistant, Olivet Boys & Girls Club, on November 14, 2014.*

2004
Joni Naugle
Peg Gill
Sharon Kemmerer

2005
n/a

2006
Peg Gill
Ramona Turner Turpin
Tonya Butler
Pat Callahan

2007
Peg Gill
Ramona Turner Turpin
Tonya Butler
Pat Callahan
Lillie Foster
Linda Matthews

2008
Peg Gill
Ramona Turner Turpin
Tonya Butler
Kathleen Hanley
Lillie Foster
Linda Matthews
Orla Nugent
Chapters
Women on Board of Directors

2009
Peg Gill
Romona Turner Turpin
Tonya Butler
Kathleen Hanley
Carmen “Rosí” Palermo
Linda Matthews
Orla Nugent

2010
Peg Gill
Romona Turner Turpin
Denise Lee
Orla Nugent
Linda Matthews
Carmen “Rosí” Palermo

2011
Peg Gill
Denise Lee
Orla Nugent

2012
Peg Gill
Stacey Adams Perry
Leslie Bell
Denise Lee
Orla Nugent
Linda Matthews

2013
Linda Matthews
Ashley Peterson
Laurie Grobman
Peg Gill

2014
Laurie Grobman
Frances Jallu
Linda Matthews
Ashley Peterson
Margaret “Peg” Gill

by Brianna Kershaw, Krupa Patel, and Kayla Showers

Margaret “Peg” Gill was the first female elected to the position of Board Chair in more than a hundred years of the Olivet organization. The Olivet Boys & Girls Club originated in 1898 as a boys-only club.

We interviewed Gill to receive information about her involvement with the Boys & Girls Club and the experiences she has had with the organization. Gill was not directly involved with the club as a child or teenager because girls were not permitted to be members until 1990. However, the club hosted events that included girls, such as talent shows, dinners, and sports games, and Gill attended these events because her brother was involved in the club. Gill’s younger brother, Walker Wadsworth, participated in the Olivet basketball team, from the age of eleven until his younger adult years.

Gill’s father, Wilfred Wadsworth, was an Olivet Board of Directors member for over 37 years. Walker Wadsworth would have followed in his father’s footsteps, but in 1997 Walker passed away at the age of 45. Gill’s brother’s passing was one factor that led her to take initiative to join the Board.

Another factor was that as her father’s health was failing, Gill joined the Board to take him to the board meetings. In April 2003, Wilfred Wadsworth father was named an Emeritus Board Member. He passed away in June 2003.

Gill informed us that being a psychology professor at Kutztown University for 34 years sparked her initial interest in the programs and services component of Board membership. Gill said, “I grew up in Reading and saw change in the kinds of opportunities that were available to kids. I thought the Olivet Club could provide what was missing, and I still think that.” In 2010, Gill was the first woman to be elected as Olivet’s Board Chair. As it happened, this was the twentieth year that girls were able to be members of the Olivet. Gill went on to explain that she then organized a week long celebration with small group activities, such as a book club, robotics, dance, etiquette, self-esteem, and a luncheon with 100 girls who met with women from the community. At this luncheon, the women were asked to participate in a mentoring program with girls from the club and it created great relationships that have continued on to expanding the program for girls.

It’s a well-known story in Olivet circles that Gill’s father was among the Board members who voted against including girls as members. But Gill told us this was because he thought it was a logistics problem since the club only had a boy’s locker room. Her father was always supportive of Gill’s activities as she was growing up, including attending sporting events with her and her brother.

Gill says, “As I learn more about the impact of the Olivet Boys & Girls Club, I realize that it was the best kept secret in Berks County because most people recognize the name but had no idea what Olivet actually did or the impact they had made.” Gill has become heavily involved in the outreach area of the organization. This helps people understand that the future of the city of Reading depends on the kids, because “great
futures start here!”

References

Peg Gill, interview by Brianna Kershaw, via email, November 15, 2014
Chapters
Transition from Boys Club to Boys & Girls Club

Transition from Boys Club to Boys & Girls Club

by Shelcea Nourrissant, Sasha Evans, and Jonathan Leimkuhler

In 1898, the club was founded as “Boys’ Friendly Club.” 92 years later, on March 29, 1990, the organization became “Olivet Boys & Girls Club.” Girls were officially admitted as members of the Olivet Boys & Girls Club May 12, 1990 (Kochler 1991). Jeffrey Palmer, former Olivet CEO, explained in an interview that after a mother won her lawsuit against the Boys Club of Detroit for not allowing her daughter to participate, Boys & Girls Club of America voted to change its name and serve girls.1 The mother said that the programs offered to girls in the city did not have the same amount of resources and not enough funding as the boys’ clubs. The national organization needed the locals clubs to go along with the decision, and it was brought to a vote at the national council meeting. It was defeated twice and passed the third time. The Olivet Board voted no the first two times.

Admitting girls as members opened additional funding streams for Olivet, since the national organization started to receive federal grants, and local clubs started to receive local funding. The Olivet leadership voted against the addition of girls to the program because they were scared of losing their identity, their alumni, and their reputation of being a strict boys club (Devera 2014). With the club’s addition of girls into the programs, the club redefined what they taught. They informed girls about sex, pregnancy, and AIDS, which at the time was becoming a major epidemic in the early 1990s (Devera 2014).

Today, the same opportunities and programs are offered to both genders. In the interview conducted with Kevin Devera, Olivet’s current Impact Director of Health & Wellness, we asked if there were any problems with the boys accepting the girls into the program. Devera recalls that the boys were very accepting except when it came to sharing their gym time. He also mentioned that girls thrived in the leadership programs they offered (2014).

Note

1 Our research did not find the name of this lawsuit, although there is a great deal of information about Boys Clubs in various states admitting girls well before 1990.

References


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14, 2014.
Amanda Stout Unit

By Mallory Barr and Brea Grant

With a grant from the Bureau of Justice Assistance for $75,000, the Amanda Stout location was opened in October of 1997 for children at the Amanda Stout Elementary School. They were open from 4:00 pm until 9:00 pm Monday through Friday for an after school program (Homan 1997). Amanda Stout Unit Director Todd Tirdell oversaw the unit as a whole, and Amanda Stout principal Mike Stralo took care of the day-to-day activities. Amanda Stout offered an arts and crafts center, an education program, a gym, a game room, and group activities, which is consistent with the rest of the club locations.

In an article, “For Some, Summer in School Can Be Fun,” City Clerk Linda A. Kelleher who was co-chairwoman of the Tenth & Penn Recreation Committee stated, “A lot of kids are left at home without childcare.” In 2000, the city and the Reading School District created a summer program to give children a safe place to go during the summer months. They paired with the YMCA and Olivet to plan activities. With a $30,000 grant from United Way of Berks County, 424 students were able to attend the summer program (Walter 2000).

During a phone interview, Rich DeGroote mentioned that Amanda Stout and 10th and Penn elementary schools combined to form an after school program for the children to attend. However, only the children from these two schools could attend due to the limited amount of space. These schools also had a summer program for children. A draft of the calendar from the summer of 2000 lists the schedule of activities for the club. The program began on July 19 and ended on August 10, and the activities went from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m. in the evening. Some of the activities included a track and field day, a cultural festival, swimming, reading time, a talent show, a carnival, and a recreation day (Tenth & Penn Recreation Committee- Southern Quadrant 2000).

Unfortunately this club was short-lived and shut down in the early 2000s because of the lack of space for the Amanda Stout classrooms (Palmer). This club did not have much money value to the club and with a lack of funding and space they could not afford to keep this unit up and running. After this unit shut down the children were allowed to attend the 13th and Perkiomen location.

References

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Palmer, Jeff. Personal Interview. 10 Apr. 2015.

Blue Mountain Camp

By Mallory Barr and Brea Grant

The Olivet Blue Mountain Camp, located in Hamburg, PA, was part of the YWCA acquisition by Olivet Boys & Girls Club in January 1992. Originally a women’s camp, it is a huge attraction and also a financial asset for the club. According to Jeff Palmer, former Olivet CEO, this is the only facility that has any monetary value to it if it were to be sold. Donations and rentals by outside groups are used to offset camp expenses (Palmer).

But the main reason this camp is important to the club is because it gives the children of Reading the opportunity to get out of the city and experience nature. For eight weeks of the summer, nearly 600 kids from the other Olivet clubs are taken to Blue Mountain to enjoy the activities it has to offer on its 125 acres. “Even though the children are only going 20 miles away, they think they are in a whole new world” (Palmer 2015). It gives the kids a taste of nature and wildlife which is something that they can’t experience in the city.

This camp offers a number of activities for the kids to participate in during the summer months, such as archery, fishing, canoeing, nature walks, swimming, and hiking. During an interview Rich DeGroote stated that the camp can sleep up to 110 people.

According to an article from the Reading Eagle, 8-year old Jayce Perez says, “No I’m not afraid of the water anymore, sometimes I always used to hang on the side of the pool but now I don’t need to” (Orozco 2013). The camp is very beneficial to the children and gives them an opportunity to learn new skills that are not accessible in the city.

Not only is this camp important to the children of Reading, the community also loves to be involved with making the camp a better environment for the children and teens. Camp board member Bill Miller stated that “A lot of [the campers] have never been in the woods before, you should see their faces when you push them across the pond in a canoe, they love it” (“Teams of Volunteers” 2013). And on April 24, 2010 Comcast Employees “completed 13 different projects at the camp, including splitting and stacking wood, power washing the pool, painting cabins, clearing trails, clearing brush and removing trees.” Jim Samaha, senior vice president of Comcast’s Keystone region, stated, “We’re so honored to be partnered with the Olivet Boys and Girls Club to work together to improve our community” (“Comcast Employees” 2010).

References


Palmer, Jeff. Personal Interview. 10 April 2015.

Center for the Arts

by Tabitha Mendez and Solomon Navo-Wonnie

One of the newest additions to the Olivet Boys & Girl club is the Center for the Arts (CFA), opened in 2000 as part of the Police Athletic League. Berks community members Irvin and Lois Cohen donated a significant portion of the funds for the CFA (Grobman and Didow). The CFA is for children and youth interested in musicals, dance, voice lessons, digital arts, chorus, and instruments. At PAL, “not everyone is into the gym scene and it gave kids a music opportunity” (Palmer 2015). Kids from all the Olivet clubs can come and participate in musicals or events at the CFA. Kids perform musicals, such as “Willy Wonka Jr,” for their parents and other club members.

During the week, the CFA offers daily classes and free transportation from the Olivet clubs. For example, in the fall of 2014, students could participate in chorus, glee club, or a digital media workshop on Mondays. On Tuesdays, African drumming (at Oakbrook), a fine arts class, and Berks PRIDE were available for children. Berks PRIDE is an anti-drug, -alcohol, -violence performance group in the city. On Wednesdays, the Wonta Nara, Olivet’s African dance team, held their practices at the Center, doing African drumming and guitar classes for different skill levels. Piano lessons for various skill levels were available on Thursdays, as well as Berks PRIDE practices. On Fridays, the drama club met before KIDS dance for younger students and TAP class for students 10 and older. Mulberry Street club hosted African drumming on Fridays, too. On CFA, appreciation is awarded to Reading Musical Foundation and Yocum Institute for the Arts for supporting their programs and instructors (Bradbury 2014).

Cultural events, such as Black History Month Celebration, also play a big role in the Center for the Arts production. This educates kids on the value of arts in different cultures. This inspires the students to participate in the arts and gives their parents a chance to watch their children. During musical events in the CFA, fundraisers are very common to raise money for the Opportunity House.

GoggleWorks Center for the Arts has a big impact with PAL and the other Olivet centers. When there is an event at the Center for the Arts building, GoggleWorks allows Olivet’s visitors to park in their parking garage and parking lot. GoogleWorks allows children to visit and participate in the art, music, and digital program there that they would not be able to partake in at their center. This gives the kids an opportunity to experience new technology and associate with students from other clubs.

When PAL and The Olivet Boys and Girls Club merged together many opportunities were made available to children. This organization motivates, builds knowledge, helps the kids express themselves, and gives the kids a safe haven. All of the programs and activities that are held at PALS Boys and Girls Club and Center for the Arts will benefit the kids in the near and far future.

References


Glenside Unit

by Jessy Saverino and Jaleel Williams

The Olivet Boys & Girls Club Glenside Unit was established in October of 1992. The Reading Housing Authority, Mayor Warren Haggerty of Reading, and Jeff Palmer, who was the Director of the Olivet Boys’ and Girls’ Club at the time, established the idea for the club. Glenside was the second club to open in public housing. It was a relatively small one-room club in the administration building (DeGroote 2015). The unit directors for Glenside in 1998 were Steve Johnson, Corry Steele, Renaldo Camacho, Tom Carter and Ida Colon-Smith (“100th Anniversary-Unit Directors”). Glenside offered the youth in the community entertainment and education. The club provided activities like Ping-Pong, bumper pool, table games, and a gym where they could exhaust their energy. They also engaged in different sports like basketball, dodge ball, and many others.

The Glenside location was established because the Oakbrook location had already developed a successful relationship with the Reading Public Housing. The youth in Glenside benefitted from the new Glenside club because they were receiving a recreation center close to home that would keep them occupied. The club has helped youth stay out of trouble and provides them with a safe place to be. The youth at the club range from six to eighteen years of age with mainly Hispanics and African Americans children and a small percentage of Caucasian children attending (Palmer 2015). Glenside offers grants to help students attend college (DeGroote 2015).

References


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Millmont

By Jaleel Williams and Jessy Severino

The Olivet Boys’ and Girls’ Club of Millmont was founded 4th of January 2014 (Harris). The club is located at the Calvary Baptist Church Community Center (Palmer). Quaker maid, Penske and Alvernia University are key contributors to this club (Harris). The club is open from three thirty in the afternoon to nine at night. It serves youth between the ages of six years old all the way up to eighteen years old (Palmer). Alvernia University has a partnership with the boys and girls club of Millmont. Students of the university intern at the boys and girls club of Millmont (Degroote), the intern’s help with specific areas of learning like keystone testing and with homework (Harris). Interns also help out with extracurricular activities. The club provides children with activities like Ping-Pong, board games and sports. The club has a basketball team and a flag football team (Harris). Olivet Boys’ and Girls’ Club of Millmont uses a local gym to play the different sports (Harris). The club is made up of different ethnic groups such as sixty percent Latino, thirty percent African American and ten percent Caucasian (Palmer). One of the students that attend the Olivet Boys’ and Girls’ Club of the Millmont was awarded the Youth of the Year for Berks County (Palmer). The Student went on to compete for youth of the year in the state of Pennsylvania but unfortunately did not win (Harris). Although the Olivet Boys’ and Girls’ Club of Millmont is a new club it serves a lot of youth. Day in and day out the club provides the right tools for the youth to succeed and stay out of trouble.

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Oakbrook Unit

by Arden McCue and Ciara Ricci

The Oakbrook Club, opened in 1990, was the first Olivet club to open since McCormick’s death in the 1923. It is a place for neighborhood children to learn, play, and enjoy activities in a safe environment. The Oakbrook Unit is located on 1161 Pershing Boulevard Reading, PA 19611.

The club originally opened as a one year experiment because there was an extreme need for a club in the Oakbrook area (Koehler 1991). Before the Oakbrook Club, there were few resources to keep the children out of trouble. The children would watch drug dealers being taken away by cops, and that was all the children knew until they were introduced to the Oakbrook Club (Farrell 1992). When the unit first opened they were able to serve 250 children in the one room they were given by the Reading Housing Authority. In this facility, children were taught about drug, alcohol, and teen pregnancy prevention. The Oakbrook unit also participated in an anti-gang initiative called the weed and seed program. Children who had a chance of one day being in a gang or in deep trouble with the law were encouraged to be in the program so they could do something to help their community and stay out of trouble later in life (Kelly 2005).

Because of the need for expansion to serve more kids in the Oakbrook community, the new 14,000 square-foot Oakbrook Club opened in April of 1993 (Young 1993). It was able to serve more children (DeGroote 2015). There were more activities and facilities available to the children in the new club, including a gym, a game room, library, an arts and crafts room, a fitness center, a kitchen and other multipurpose spaces.

Today, the Oakbrook members have the opportunity to participate in music and art activities at the GoggleWorks in Reading. For Thanksgiving the members and their families can enjoy a meal together at the club. The police and housing authority say the area around Oakbrook Club has become much safer since the new club opened (DeGroote 2015). The club continues to serve boys and girls in the Oakbrook community today.

References


PAL Unit

by Solomon Navo-Wonnie and Tabitha Mendez

The local Police Athletic League of Greater Reading (PAL), established in 1953, merged with the Olivet Boys and Girls Club in 2004, and the PAL continued its PAL membership (DeGroote). The PAL center became known as the PAL Unit of Olivet BGC (Wenger). The merger allowed the continuation of programs and services to over 1000 youth (DeGroote). The organizations had already been collaborating on some services and programs (Wenger).

PAL’s goal is to “give kids in the neighborhood an option with their future” (Palmer). PAL’s gym was donated to them by Nike, and Olivet uses the gym to “enrich their lives and help make them successful students, athletes and citizens” (“Our Mission”). Some of the sports programs that PAL offers are NFL flag football, swimming, basketball, soccer, table/ board games, and structured gym. All these programs have their separate age groups. PAL participates in the Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities initiative of Major League Baseball. This program works to expose inner city youth to the sport of baseball. PAL also offers field trips to such events and places as the 76ers games, college games and museums.

References


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Wyomissing Unit

by Arden McCue and Ciara Ricci

The Wyomissing unit of Olivet Boys & Girls Club was a relatively short-lived club. The club started through the Wyomissing Community Prevention Partnership in 2003 (DeGroote 2015). It was originally located in the basement of The Hard Bean Cafe, 600 Penn Avenue in West Reading, which is today in 2015 Say Cheese restaurant (“West Reading Center Sets Registration Dates” 2003).

It took several years for the Prevention Partnership to find a location for a youth center. The Prevention Partnership and the Olivet Boys and Girls Club worked together to create activities for the club members, and Olivet was contracted to run the program. West Reading Police Chief Keith Phillips expressed concern about the location as well as the safety of the staff and children. According to Lockhart, “having a youth center in West Reading was a good idea,” but he seemed to be concerned about children traversing Penn Avenue traffic (Lockhart 2003). Our research found no evidence that there were any accidents.

Although Wyomissing is known primarily as an affluent area, there was still a need for a club. Any student located in the Wyomissing community was able to use the club (“West Reading” 2003). The club coordinators brought a pool table and a miniature ping pong table to the club to entertain the kids. It was a “mobile club,” in that they would have to pack up at the end of the week because the cafe occupied the room over the weekend.

The Wyomissing club later moved to the West Reading Firehouse, which had a lot more space for the children. When the Wyomissing unit lost its funding, it closed, and the members of the Wyomissing Club were welcomed into the Oakbrook Club (DeGroote).

References


Chapters
African Americans at Olivet

by Stephen Hunsicker and Brad Hoffman

In 1898, when The Boys Friendly Club (later to become the Olivet Boys Club) was first formed, Reading’s population was only about 0.67% African American, according to the 1900 United States Census (Grobman and Kunkelman 96-98). In later years the Club’s population was primarily white, but was open to any boy. The minority and immigrant population in the club’s neighborhood were discriminated against but were welcomed at Olivet (Palmer). In 1935, the Olivet Boys Club hosted a “Federal Education for Negroes Program.” This was part of Herbert Hoover’s Emergency Relief Program to provide assistance to the citizens. The Federal Education Program was designed to give African Americans safe activities to participate in (“Federal Education Program for Negroes”).

The archived materials from Olivet show a photograph with African American boys attending Olivet Boys Club in 1954. After speaking with multiple black and white members of the Olivet Clubs in the 1950s and 1960s, we learned that none had experienced nor witnessed any discrimination at Olivet from other kids or staff members. Also, State Senator James E. Norton, who was also a director at the Olivet Boys’ club in 1928, said that “The club has no scheme of religion, no color prejudice” (“Rotarians”). Numerous photographs, however, showed African Americans standing with one another.

African Americans made up varying proportions at the Olivet Clubs. Club No. 1 on Clinton Street had a large African American community because it was located in an African American neighborhood. However, Club No. 4 on Mulberry Street was in a white, blue-collar neighborhood so was 99% white until the late 1960s (G. Spencer). The Olivet Clubs tried to allow African Americans to experience typical everyday activities they normally would not be able to participate in. For example, African Americans were not allowed to swim in
the only city pool that was in Reading. Once the Olivet Pool opened in 1921, African Americans had a clean and safe place to swim. As Gary Spencer recalls it, Club No. 4 was only about 2% black while 97% white in 1964. However, in the mid-1970s, it was about 18% Black, 80% White, with the Hispanic population beginning to grow both in the Olivet Boys & Girls Clubs and in the city of Reading in general (G. Spencer). In the 1980s, Olivet Club No. 1’s members were about 80% Black (Palmer).

As time continued to pass, more African Americans made Reading their homes, according to census data. Census data from 2012 recorded 13.2% of the population in Reading to be African American. About 26% of the kids who currently attend Olivet are African American (“Olivet Boys and Girls”).

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Olivet Baseball

by Darren Davis, Zachary Hall, and Bianca Mohn

Since its inception in the late 19th century, the baseball program has played a vital role in the Olivet Boys Club. The program was able to redirect the energy and “wildness” of young boys into a constructive form of exercise and play. The boys could play and fulfill their competitive nature in a healthy form of competition (Grant 1). A nine inning game could allow the boys to momentarily forget what their home lives are like and just allow them to play and have fun. It was an escape back to what boyhood should be. They were frequently in the newspapers with game scores, right alongside the major leaguers! What the boys were doing was resulting in a feeling of profound importance. There were many generous and caring people that allowed the program to continue, whether it be time spent with the boys coaching or organizing or even building parks (big or small) for the boys to play. For almost a century and a half, the baseball program never ceased to exist. It was successful from day one and still provides an enormous amount of usefulness and enjoyment to young boys in less than desirable circumstances.

Baseball was a major pastime activity for young boys who participated in the Olivet clubs. There were many people who encouraged the advancement of baseball programs throughout the years. In 1907, Albert Lawson, a baseball promoter, founded Lauer’s Park and thought it to be an “ideal park” for the Olivet Boys Club (Bigony 1969). Lawson secured a long lease on Lauer’s Park.

A major former Olivet alumnus and contributor in the earlier years of baseball programs in Reading was “Broadway” Charlie Wagner, who was with the Boston Red Sox organization as a pitcher, administrator and scout from 1935 until his death in 2006; Wagner remained affiliated with the Red Sox when he served during the Navy in World War Two from 1943-1945 but was also a lifelong resident of Reading, PA (“‘Broadway’ Charlie Wagner” 2014). Wagner, an Olivet alumnus, was the driving force in Lauer’s Park stadium. He went to each and every game between the Olivet Boys Club’s teams, and became a celebrity figurehead in the recreation of Lauer’s Park. In 2006 at the age of 92, Wagner passed away, sleeping in his car in the parking lot of the First Energy Stadium. In order to pay homage, Olivet personnel colored the seat he always sat in red (Devera 2014).
There were many alumni within the Olivet Boys Clubs who ended up continuing to contribute and play a part in representing the Olivet Club’s baseball teams. Ralph O. Bigony, for example, was an individual who not only played baseball but also collected and shared much information on the Olivet Boys Club. He was also one of the earlier Olivet men, along with the founder William “Mac” McCormick. In 1914, Bigony was a part of the city champion team, which was managed by Roy C. Brown. Brown was known to be a manager for the Olivet team in 1910 and for the next 15 years. Another individual that documented information on Olivet baseball teams was Charles J. Adams III, author of the book, Baseball in Reading. Many other high memorable baseball continued to play a role for the Olivet Boys Clubs during their adult lives. For example, Jeff Palmer, previous member of the Olivet Boy’s Club for six years and player as well as coach for the city-county Jr. League, ended up working for the Olivet Boy’s Club for 42 years. Palmer became in charge of the Olivet Boy’s Club No. 4 in 1975. According to Palmer, throughout his years of working at the organization, a notable player was Cooter Jones, who became a coach of a school baseball team. (Palmer 2014)

Olivet teams played at many of Reading’s baseball fields throughout the twentieth century. One of the most popular parks was Lauer’s Park. Built in 1907, this park was home to not only Olivet, but also many major leaguers. Some players included Babe Ruth and Olivet’s own Charlie Wagner, who later supported the recreation of Lauer’s Park (Devera 2014). The stadium originally faced away from Walnut and Third Street. The original stadium was last played on in 1941 by the Interstate Brooklyn Dodgers. The park had several problems, including small seating capacity and very little parking. The original stadium was dismantled in 1943 (Adams 2003).

Today the former Lauer’s Park stadium is a scaled down version of the original and is generally used by 10-12 year olds and hosts many Olivet games. Called Gordon Hoodak stadium, it features grandstands, a snack bar, announcing booth (with Olivet’s logo on the side) and sponsor advertisements on the outfield fence. Gordon Hoodak stadium gives a big league field on a much smaller footprint. It gives the children a feeling of importance and aspirations (Devera 2014).

Another famous city stadium is George Field built in 1901. George field is the oldest and most recognizable field in the city, with the familiar train track shown in portraits and pictures of the field. It still stands today and still hosts many baseball games for the Olivet Boys & Girls club.

Another major park was Circus Maximus which is located where the current Albright stadium is. It was built in 1909 and quickly fell into bankruptcy in 1912.(Adams 2003).

Olivet had many teams throughout its history, most of which do not have names. This is mostly because they identified within clubs (Club No.1 had their own team and so on), but kept the Olivet name, making them
hard to distinguish. “Mac” McCormick gave most of the team’s names from literature, so it wasn’t uncommon for a baseball team to have a name like the “Eurekas” (DeGroote 2014). Some early names of the Olivet baseball teams were the Arrows, Eurekas, and the Clovers (DeGroote 2014).

With Roy Brown coaching baseball, and the lack of personal names for teams, the Reading Eagle would often coin his team as “Roy Brown’s Olivets,” and report the inner workings and doings of his team much like a Major League team (“Olivets To Hold First Practice” 1922). Often, practices and away games were posted for the kids. The teams picked up a lot of coverage in the local newspapers thanks to Olivet founder William “Mac” McCormick, who owned a newspaper (DeGroote 2014).

In 1918, it was reported that Olivet would be merging their baseball teams together. “Uncle Sam has taken so many of the Olivet and Elaine baseball players that it will be necessary [for them] to merge the two to get a representative for the Clinton and West Oley Club Candidates for the team” (“Olivet Merges” 1918). As World War I continued, it became an explanation as to why there were so few secure teams.

During the 1960s, Jeffrey Palmer became part of a newly organized team and Ben Kemp served as head coach. Palmer recalled that in 1967 that they became the champions of the Reading Class C League (Palmer 2014). At the time, there were two major leagues within Berks County: the Class C league, and the AFL-CIO Union league. In the AFL CIO League postings in the Reading Eagle, Olivet had names for their teams, the second time they were recorded. Names were Clothing, Steel, Brewery, Textile, and Iron. (“Ball is an Olivet Activity” 1957)

One can see the enormity of the entire baseball program in the Olivet organization. At one point, however, it was almost lost. Palmer stated that when he played, and into the next decade, baseball seemed to be losing its appeal. People outside of Olivet lost interest. For Olivet to continue to have baseball speaks very highly to the dedication of many selfless people, and the benefits that they saw in the sport. Major League Baseball also saw the benefits to baseball programs for youth, and in 1993 implemented the RBI program, which is Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities. As of June 30, 2014, Phillies RBI League annually brings an all-star team of RBI junior league players to Reading to play the all-star team of Olivet boys and girls, reviving baseball in the community, and for the Olivet Boys and Girls Club of America.

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Donors Support Olivet Boys & Girls Club

By Carolyn Nguyen, Jennifer Von Holt and Catherine Perkins

There are many different forms of donations that can be given to the Olivet Boys & Girls Club. According to our research, the first donor was William McCormick, who gave time and money to start the Boys Friendly Club, which became Olivet Boys’ Club and led to the Olivet Boys & Girls Club (Palmer 2014). Today, donors include corporations, organizations and individual donations from previous club members and community members who are dedicated to providing a good future to impoverished children (Palmer 2014).

After MacCormick’s death, William H. Luden and his wife continued this tradition by purchasing extensions to Club No. 4 and Club No. 1, as well as offering the deeds to both facilities to the Olivet Boys’ Club. Mr. and Mrs. Luden are the next major donors to the club. In the article we found on newspapers.com, Mrs. Luden was mentioned as a donor with her husband (“Ludens Donate”).

At this time, it was realized that donations were needed to keep the club’s in operation, and the same holds true today. These donations included corporations and individual monetary gifts.

The Jeremiah Milbank society is very important to Boys & Girls Clubs across the nation. Jeremiah Milbank was a life-long philanthropist. Over the course of his life, he donated money and time to help children in need. He was approached by President Herbert Hoover to develop the Boys Club national organization and served as treasurer for the national branch for twenty five years. It was this dedication and service that inspired the Jeremiah Milbank Society (Boys & Girls Club of America 2004). Donors are the foundation of helping children have better lives, as Jeremiah Milbank stated, “illness in the social sense, [can deprive children] from disadvantaged backgrounds a fair chance in life” (Boys & Girls 2004).

In February 2004, the Jeremiah Milbank Society was created. It is an important creation because it helps people to be “engaged [sic] by strengthening their understanding and support for Boys & Girls Clubs, and by recognizing their deep commitment to the children of their community (Boys & Girls 2004).

For Olivet Boys & Girls Club, the Milbank Society has helped donate a great amount funds. Any donor that gives a sum of $10,000 for unrestricted use is considered a Milbank Society member. These individuals receive recognition locally and nationally for their wonderful gifts (Boys & Girls of America 2004).

Olivet also has local affiliation with another group of individual donors called the Heritage Club. It is an association of friends of the Boys & Girls Clubs from across the country (Boys & Girls of America 2009). In order to provide for the future of the nation’s at-risk children, the Heritage Club includes the Boys & Girls Clubs into their estate plans. This includes inclusion in their wills, a charitable gift annually, a trust fund or an insurance plan. Like the Jeremiah Milbank Society, the Heritage Club receives recognition on the national and local level in the clubs’ annual reports (Boys & Girls of America 2009).
The United Way of Berks County is a major donor to Olivet. This relationship began in 1928, when the Olivet Boys Club asked to join the Council of Social Agencies of Reading to receive financial support from the Community Chest, the United Way’s predecessor. The newspaper article states that membership, finances, equipment and property of club will be discussed if the Community Chest were to approve the application, and the Olivet Boys Club would be supported through the Chest (“Olivet Boys’ Club” 1928). The review committee recommended that Olivet become a member of the Council of Social Agencies on March 13, 1928 (“Okeh Admission”), and it was made official on March 15, 1928 (“Olivets, Legal Aid Society Admitted” 1928). At the time, Olivet was operating with a $1200.00 deficit, and was “declared worthy of financial and moral support” (“Okeh Admission” 1928). The Community Chest became the United Fund and is now referred to as United Way.

The United Way of Berks County has been donating to the Olivet Boys & Girls Club of Reading for at least 50 years. Annually, they fund approximately $900,000, the most they donate to any organization annually. Their main reason for funding the Boys & Girls Club is because United Way also makes it their mission to help children be successful and grow up in a well developed environment. This year, the United Way of Berks County is planning on adding $10,000 more to their donation given last year (Giles 2014).

Along with donations from individuals, Olivet holds many events in order to raise money. One popular event is called “Kiss-a-Pig”. Contestants pay money to be part of the event. Even if one is not a contestant, there are various amounts of food choices that one can buy while watching the event. All the proceeds go towards the Olivet Boys & Girls Club. Another successful fundraiser the club holds is the Olivet Golf Invitational. In order to play a round of golf at this event, people pay $500 dollars or more making them a platinum, silver or gold sponsor depending on their donation amount. Both “Kiss-a-pig” and the Golf Invitational are major fundraisers that keep the club going. Both have been running for years and only continue to grow in popularity (Boys & Girls 2010).

Throughout our research, we found many donors and donations that are given yearly by many different individuals and corporations. However, most big corporations did not reply to our requests for information. Grants, volunteer work, campaigns, individual monetary donations and corporations such as United Way continue to be the backbone of donations to today’s Olivet Boys & Girls Club.

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Olivet Old-Timers Club, 1960s

by Makayla Tamborra, Kyrolls Isaac, Patrick Kirn

Our research started with looking at binders that were provided by the Olivet BGC. The Olivet BGC archives included newsletters about the banquets held every year. The club would send invitations to Alumni who were considered to be the old-timers. The Olivet Old-Timers was an alumni association that all Olivet members became part of when they turned 18. The newsletters mentioned some Old-Timers members who were in the club and also people who sent a response to the invite who couldn’t make it for some reason. The Banquets started around the early 1910s and they died out during the 1970s. The Banquets consisted of guest speakers, a good dinner to share with the members and a friendly atmosphere to converse and recall the good memories that they shared when they were younger.

The Olivet & Girls Club had many old-timers during the 1960’s. One of the old timers was Robert “Bob” Moyer. Robert Moyer was the brother of the well-known Spike Moyer who was former director of recreation for the city of Reading and of the Olivet. Bob Moyer gave us his recollection of what he remembered. Bob became active again in the Old Timers club after he returned from the US Navy which he served from 1942-1964. He attended some banquets during the 50s, 60s and 70s. He recalled many memories from the Old Timers banquets. Moyer remembered the food the most; it was always prepared by the Ladies Auxiliary. The Ladies Auxiliary was headed by his mother. They prepared gourmet meals for the men during the banquet. The meals consisted of roast beef, roast pork, meatloaf and homemade salad. He also mentioned numerous guest speakers who came from many different places. He said they ranged from local government officials to U.S. senators. There was also the occasional popular college athlete that came to speak. Moyer also spoke about how these banquets had no consumption of alcohol whatsoever. The Banquets were a great time and held many memories.

Some of the members who were mentioned in the newsletters had some impact on others and they were mentioned in newspaper articles. Dr. Harry R. Warfel joined the club in 1910 and became a professor of English at the University of Florida (Adams 1966). Karl Friedman was another important person in the Old-timer’s history. Karl was a speaker at one of the banquets in 1959. He was also the President of Girard College and in one of the articles that we found, Friedman was mentioned being against “all white” schools (“Admission” 1966). Another important member of the association was John Morgan Davis. In 1962, Philadelphia politicians gathered to discuss possible governor nominees. US Republican William J. Green Jr., gave strong support to John Davis to be a candidate for governor. John Morgan Davis wasn’t only a well known politician, he was also a great father. His son asked to go to summer camp and John Davis’ response was “You must earn that right, son” (“Lieutenant Governor” 1960). He told his son that he could earn that by getting good grades. Patricia Ann and Carole, John’s daughters, both wanted to be teachers. John was also the president of the Parent Teacher Association of Philadelphia Girls High School for six years and he always sought and worked toward improvements in the education system. The Olivet Old-Timers Association’s main goal was to bring old friends together to discuss what they had done in their lives. A simple get-together left an impact in those people’s hearts. From hearing different people talk about the banquets, it
seemed like the old-timers waited every year to meet up and enjoy a hot meal.

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Olivet Old Timers 70’s to Present

by Matt Manzo and Morgan Unangst

The Olivet Old Timers were past members of the club who continued to donate money to help the club grow or were involved in the club after they turned 18. In order to understand the significance of the Olivet Old Timers during the 1970s to the present we must first tell the history of who they are. The Olivet Old Timers took it upon themselves to help members of the club and remember old times they had together. The Old Timers would put money in their wills to help support the club after they had passed away and would make donations as they could afford it. By searching through Binder 6 in the Olivet BGC Archives and talking to Randy Boyer and Rich DeGroote we have decided to document two past members of the Olivet Old Timers who have had a significant impact on the club.

During Randy Boyer’s interview he talked to us about his years in the club. Randy played basketball, pool, bowling and baseball. Although the club’s basketball team was mostly known for club one, in 1967 his baseball team in the club won the class C championship with a record of 20 wins and one loss. His current next-door neighbor was his baseball coach when he was younger and attended the club.

Boyer became interested in the martial art of Judo after a friend of his father took him to a Judo practice. Judo is a sport of unarmed combat derived from jujitsu and intended to train the body and mind. It involves using holds and leverage to unbalance the opponent. He practiced once a week and later on moved to twice a week. He won a Judo Championship in 1967. He also taught classes for two years at Clinton Street Club No. 1. There were usually 8-9 kids attending the classes.

One day during a basketball game two club members, Darnell Coad and Randy Boyer got into a fight on the Basketball court. After the game, the coach gave them big boxing gloves and told them to settle their differences in a safe and manly way. Coad Darnell later became the mayor of the town of Wernersville.

One of his most memorable experiences was in 1965 during an award dinner. Randy won the Olivet Boy of the Year Award. Spike Moyer, Marvin Mercer, and Cy Brobst were Olivet Board Members or personnel at the time who observed members with their academic achievements in school and their activities in the club and awarded this award to one member a year. The Olivet Boy of the Year Award held a lot of pride in the Olivet Boys Club.

Boyer recalls that one of his funniest moments was when he was a teenager of about 15-16 years old. He was at summer camp at the OBC and it was a hot day in the mid-July. Boyer walked over to get a bottle of water in the fridge to chug down. After consuming large sips he then realized that it was a bottle of vinegar. These are the type of humorous memories that Boyer has remembered at the club and has shared with us in addition to all of the entertaining experiences he had there.

Later on in his life Randy Boyer was part of the Olivet Boys & Girls Club Board of Directors from
1994-1997. Some of his jobs on the board were to make key decisions on the club’s staff, policies, fundraisers like the golf tournament, and hiring new directors for the club.

Another Old Timer who was greatly impacted by the club and in addition was a man of honor is Marvin K. Gehman. Gehman was born in Berks County Pennsylvania on July 28th, 1914 (Hornbaker “Marvin Mercer”). Gehman graduated Reading High School during 1932 (Hornbaker “Marvin Mercer”). On May 23, 1946 Gehman was at Reading’s Armory (which is now the location of the PAL Olivet Boys’ & Girls Club at Rose and Walnut Street) watching a wrestling match when he offered to wrestle and made his wrestling debut (Hornbaker “Marvin Mercer”). Gehman’s wrestling career lasted from 1946-1960 during which he had been given the title Junior Heavyweight Champion and “Mr. Physical Culture”.

“Marvin Mercer” was the wrestling name that Marvin Gehman used and the name “Mercer” originated from Marvin’s brother’s middle name (Flannery 1992). During Gehman’s wrestling career, he had 1,887 wins and 368 draws (Hornbaker “Marvin Mercer”). Gehman was given the title heavy weight champion and held it for eleven years (Boys’ Club 1982). Marvin also received the title “Mr. Physical Culture” by “Bernard McFadden, who was famous for parachuting at age 90, in McFadden’s Health Review Magazine in 1952” (Flannery 1992). Robert Ripley’s “Believe It or Not’s” featured Marvin and made him famous for his “atomic drop kick” (Flannery 1992). In a split second Gehman could use his foot to hit the opponent’s chin and then land on his feet (Flannery 1992).

An interesting match that Gehman had was in Jersey City, New Jersey at Roosevelt Stadium (Flannery 1992). Gehman had a match against Amelio Argamante and during the match Gehman broke his opponent’s ankle. During May 1977 Gehman was entered into the “Berks County Chapter of the Pennsylvania Sports Hall of Fame” (Hornbaker “Marvin Mercer”). Gehman decided to retire his wrestling career at age 46 in 1960.

In 1960 Gehman became the unit director at the original Olivet Boys’ Club (Boys’ Club 1982). Randy Boyer expressed how much Gehman influenced him as a boy when he attended the club. Boyer looked up to Gehman from day one because Gehman had all the characteristics of someone to look up to: He was nice, had good values, and was dedicated to helping children. Gehman gave Boyer a book that had a focus on choices and how choices in life define who you are. Gehman would have told stories of his wrestling career and occasionally on Friday nights, he would have worn his wrestling uniform and played with the kids. Boyer described it as being picked up “as if they were paper dolls.”

Marvin Gehman retired from being the unit director of the Olivet Boys’ Club in 1980. In 1982 Marvin Gehman was “honored at the 79th annual Olivet Old Timers’ banquet at the Club headquarters at 677 Clinton Street” (Boys’ Club 1982). At this ceremony he was given the “prestigious Bronze Keystone Award from the Boys’ Clubs of America for a long and devoted service” (Boys’ Club 1982). In 1992 he was 77 years old living in Rockland Township with his wife Rita and in Gehman’s retirement he owned a tree farm with 220 acres of land (Flannery 1992). On April 30th, 1997 Marvin K. Gehman passed away.

In the Olivet archives we have found the names of several other old-timers in the 1970s: Jeff Palmer, “Spike”
Moyer, Jakie Folk, Gyp Cremer, Soup Thompson, Pud Hafner, Beany Betz, John Meek, Bob Ibach, Ben Schwambach, Christy Mathewson, Dutch Noecker, Joh Stubler, Ken Gallagher, Terry Conner.

The Olivet Old Timers club ended due to dwindling attendance at their banquets as the men were getting older and passing away. Jeff Palmer, former Executive Director of the Boys Club, informed us that because of the format and name of the organization younger alumni were reluctant to get involved. Jeff also said the Olivet Boys Club was in transition and was in need of additional funds to carry out their objectives. A big project that was under construction was the renovation of club number one on Clinton Street, which took place in 1995. As a result Jeff said an annual fundraising dinner and annual campaign were started and the remaining members from the old timers were folded into the club’s fundraising activities to keep them involved in the club.

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The Relationship with the National Organization

by Long Vy, Felix Mateo, and Timothy Fish

Everything started off with an idea which was to help the youth and the city of Reading. This idea can be seen in the Olivet Boys & Girls Club mission statement:

*Olivet Boys & Girls Club enables all young people, especially those who need us most, to reach their full potential as healthy, productive, caring, responsible citizens (Boys & Girls Club of America 2013).*

The mission statement was built off the ideals of the founder, William (Mac) McCormick. In 1898, Mac had popularized the boys’ club movement with his first club, the Boys Friendly Club. At first being an act of kindness, after seeing kids out on the street, Mac decided to rent a local social hall and planned activities for the boys. All of this was a way to keep the kids off the streets and out of trouble (DeGroote 2014). A few years after the first club was started, the Boys Friendly Club changed its name to the Olivet Boys Club in 1902 (Boys and Girls Club of America 1997). At this point of the Olivet history, the boys’ club movement around the nation started to exceed expectations and more clubs were starting to form. Because of the formation of new clubs, there were many problems that were starting to arise, the main problems being shortages in staff and funding. In 1906, 53 organizations met in Boston to form the first national organization known as the Federated Boys’ Club with Jacob Riis as its first president. The purpose of this new organization was to keep records, conduct conferences, advise clubs, secure and train workers, establish new Clubs and extend knowledge about their work nationwide (Boys and Girls Club of America 2006). Simply put, the Club needed a “parent” so to speak that could help them in running their clubs and helping others and so became a charter member of the Federated Boys’ Club.

Mac was able to put being a publisher to good use. Much of Mac’s income was from his position at the Reading Daily Herald as the owner and editor. With his resources at the Herald, Mac published three books along with a monthly magazine titled Work with Boys (Boys and Girls Club of America 1997). Mac was interested in not only the boys in Reading, Pennsylvania but the entire reform movement as it related to boys. At the time, Work with Boys was a great way to spread information and provide technical support amongst the clubs. The first three volumes were dedicated to what the organization was doing and who they were doing it for. Essentially these volumes set a standard of what the clubs should be and need to be doing (Boys’ Clubs of America and General Alliance of Workers with Boys). The volumes after the third issue include more information about other clubs and their activities.

In 1972, William Bricker was named the Executive Director of the organization that at this point was called Boys’ Club of America. Richard DeGroote told us the story that Bricker told to him: When he was boy, Bricker and his friends jumped the fence at the Olivet’s to swim in the club pool. That was until Executive Director Pat Frobey caught the kids in the act. Rather than giving them a harsh punishment Frobey said, “I will give you two options. I can contact your parents and let them take care of you, or you can join our club.” Bricker decided to join the club, then later worked for Olivet and eventually became national director of the
entire organization (DeGroote 2014).

In 1977, Jeff Palmer was officially appointed as the Executive Director of the Olivet Boys Club. Palmer first started in the club in 1972, during Bricker’s time as executive director. Also being a good acquaintance of Bricker, whenever Bricker would visit the clubs in Reading he would always have Palmer take him to his old house on Oley St (Palmer 2014). During Palmer’s tenure with the organization a lot of what was focused on was training, marketing, and lobbying the government to aid the clubs. When Palmer first started at age 25, like many others had to take part in a two week training program to work with the clubs. Training new staff members is very important to the organization. Marketing was also a big deal for the organization because as Palmer stated, “everyone knew who the Boys Scouts were but knew little about the Boys Clubs” (Palmer 2014). Because of the lack of publicity of the clubs, a lot of thought was put into the advertisement.

Today, Olivet operates many programs through the national organization. Youth of the Year is one of the many programs. Established in 1947, Youth of the Year is the organization’s premier recognition program for Club members, promoting service to Club, community and family; academic success; strong moral character; life goals; and poise and public speaking ability. The program is most effective when used as a year-round tool for fostering young people’s character, personal growth and leadership qualities. Winners of the Youth of the Year program receive scholarship money and have the chance to meet the President of the United States (Devera 2014).

The Olivet Boys & Girls Club of America is always changing and striving to improve their organization. One thing that seems to stay the same locally, at Olivet are the same ideas and principles passed down by William (Mac) McCormick: “to enable all young people, especially those who need us most, to reach their full potential as healthy, productive, caring, responsible citizens.”

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Randy Boyer: a Story of Humanity, Hard Work and Joy

by Kimberly Alice Grinberg

By the time Randy Boyer reached the age of twenty, he had already been mentored by a 10 year cruiser weight wrestling champion of the world, won the 1967 city championship baseball tournament, traveled through each New England state, and had a boxing fight with the soon to be mayor of a borough of Berks County. He had won Judo championships and graduated high school in the top 10 percent of his class. Perhaps it is with some surprise that anyone who has the honor of hearing Mr. Boyer’s story is immediately confronted by one resounding fact that shapes his experiences: Mr. Boyer was not affluent. He grew up in the housing projects of Glenside, where his family had never been able to afford a vacation. However when Mr. Boyer was 10 years old he decided to join the Olivet Boys and Girls Club of Reading, a decision he would come to find out, would shape the rest of his life, and give him opportunities he would never had otherwise imagined.

Playing baseball with a couple pals from the neighborhood in 1960, Mr. Boyer began to hear about something that sparked his interest. His friends talked of a place close by, where boys could play sports together. As a 10 year old boy, a space where he could go and spend time with his friends as well as get to play sports was as close to a dream as reality could offer. After consulting with his mother, he went to see the club, and with three dollars he had made from cutting grass, registered at the Olivet Boys and Girls Club Number 1 on Clinton St. It was a decision that although made in his youth, would end up impacting his life for the next 54 years.

Mr. Boyer’s time at the club was versatile in format, but consistent in function. Whether he was participating in a scheduled baseball practice, or shooting pool with his friends after school, he was always safe and happy. He was there nearly every night of the week. His walks with friends to the Clinton Street Club became as routine as going to school. With daily activities that included basketball, baseball, weight lifting and bowling, it was no wonder that Mr. Boyer soon found himself spending about 15 hours of his free time per week at the Club. It was participation in these activities at the Club that ultimately led to much success in the area of sports for him. In 1967 he won the Class C City Championships with his baseball team. The entire team had practiced weeknights, and so in the pivotal moment that resulted in victory, their coach Ben Kemp had each member of the team sign two baseballs. While one baseball went to the Olivet Boys and Girls Club, the other went to Mr. Kemp. However, the true curve ball would not come until forty two years later, when Mr. Boyer moved into his new house in Wyomissing, a borough of Berks County. It was 2009, and he discovered that Mr. Kemp was his new neighbor. It was a year later that Mr. Kemp stopped Mr. Boyer while he was mowing the lawn and handed him that winning ball from 1967. In 2014 Mr. Boyer still has that baseball.

Mr. Boyer’s excellence in sports at the Olivet sparked his interest in physical engagement outside of the club. He began to learn Martial Arts when he was fourteen. In 1967 he won the East Coast Atlantic Regional Judo Championships as a middle weight. Although this experience took place outside of the club, Mr. Boyer made a point of returning the value of it to the youth at Olivet. In his early twenties, he taught a class of eight
children Judo martial arts. He taught them the fundamentals, and how to get started. (Mr. Boyer states that the meaning of Judo actually translates to “gentle way”).

While engagement and practice of different forms of physical activity resulted in much success for Mr. Boyer, it was the relationships he formed at the Club that were perhaps the most profound in impacting and shaping his character and life trajectory. With resonating happiness Mr. Boyer is able to recount one person in particular who impacted him at the Club. This person’s name was Marvin Gehman and he was the athletic director of the Club. At least this is how he was known to the members of the Olivet Boys and Girls Club. To the rest of the world, he was Marvin Mercer ten year cruiser weight wrestling champion of the world. His wrestling name was derived from his brother’s middle name Dr. Jesse Mercer Gehman. Mr. Boyer quickly began to have daily contact with him and soon Marvin Gehman was more than the athletic director of Olivet, he was a personal role model for Mr. Boyer. To Mr. Boyer, Marvin Gehman was by definition a “clean cut, upstanding citizen who had made it on his own”. It was a reality Mr. Boyer envisioned for himself. Although never having received degrees from institutions of higher education, Gehman was intelligent. He was a gymnast that perfected his wrestling skills until they were recognized by the world.

One day when Mr. Boyer was 14 years old, Marvin Gehman gave him a book. The book was all about choices. It chronicled the results of different individuals who made good choices and who made bad choices. Mr. Boyer remembers reading the book and learning an important lesson “choose wisely or you will pay the price.”

One of the most important things learned at the club for Mr. Boyer was how to get along with others. This came to fruition through the development of meaningful relationships. But just as importantly, Mr. Boyer learned how to engage in conflict management, a fundamental skill when learning how to be socially capable. It was 1964 and Mr. Boyer was engaged in a critical basketball game. Bad blood was running strong between himself and a boy named Allan D. Coad, but who everyone at the club knew by his middle name Darnell Coad. By the end of the game, the atmosphere was pregnant with rage. Instead of letting Cove and Boyer exit after the game, the Olivet officers made the boys stay. The officers went to the basement of the building and emerged with two sets of boxing gloves. With an audience of over 100 kids, the boys put on the gloves and took out their frustration. The gloves prevented anyone from getting hurt, but Mr. Boyer remembers that after the fight, the bad blood had been extinguished. It didn’t matter who had won. At the time neither of them knew that Coad would end up becoming the mayor of Wernersville from 1990 to 1994. The boxing fight was a way that physical activity was used as a healthy alternative to what otherwise may have been a hostile relationship. Mr. Boyer insists that an incident like this was an anomaly at the club. By virtue, the club was a space defined by its communal nature. Walking to the club after school with his friends, Mr. Boyer never had to worry about being beaten up. In addition “once you had friends there [at the club] you knew them at school, older kids looked out for younger kids, that’s just the way it was.”

It was in 1965, and at 15 years old Mr. Boyer was getting ready to attend the Olivet Boys and Girls Club annual dinner. Little did he know, this was no ordinary dinner. His only speculation into the specialness of the event was that his father had decided to attend with him. Mr. Boyer recalls it was an era when parents just didn’t come to their children’s events. But on this occasion, the father and son pair went together. At the
dinner, sitting quietly, Mr. Boyer heard his name called. He was being named “Olivet Boys Club #1 Boy of the Year.” The award was one given to members based on a criteria of good grades and overall merit among other things. He was handed a plaque and photographed for an article in the Reading Eagle. He remembers how awesome it felt to be recognized for his achievement. It was having his father there to witness this event that made it all the more special.

Mr. Boyer’s experiences at the club shaped his character in ways that had an impact on the rest of his experiences, even outside of the club. As a person who had always believed in hard work, Mr. Boyer had held a steady job as a paper boy from the time he was twelve until he was fifteen. He took his job seriously, and even in his youth understood the importance of a good work ethic. Mr. Boyer would wake up at 4:00 am to deliver the Reading Times. If it was raining, he would slip the newspaper through the slots of doors to make sure that no one ever received a wet paper. But when Mr. Boyer was fifteen he was confronted with a true test of character, although he certainly did not see it this way. It was 1965 and it was a Saturday.

Saturday’s were unique because they were the day that the district manager of the Reading Times would arrive at Mr. Boyer’s house and take the subscription funds that Mr. Boyer had collected the day before. On this particular Saturday Mr. Flowers engaged in a conversation with Boyer’s mother that happened to prove distracting. Whether they were discussing the weather, or the news, the result was that the envelope containing the collected money, was left on the chair of the Boyer’s kitchen. For many individuals perhaps this would constitute a momentary pause; a second of hesitation where the fleeting desire to do right was yielding to certain other inclinations. Resting on the chair of a teenager’s home in a housing project in Glenside, the money waited to be discovered. Luckily for Mr. Flowers however, the money had been left not at any child’s house, but at Randy Boyer’s. A kid raised at the Olivet, whose character was a result of five years of being submerged in an institution which coveted integrity, hard work and beneficial social relationships. Upon finding the money, Mr. Boyer did not hesitate for even a second before having his mother call to notify Mr. Flowers of his mistake. Mr. Boyer hadn’t even considered another option, because there was no other option. A result of his nature, being gently constructed and nurtured by the Club, ensured that in cases of character, Mr. Boyer would make the right Choices. Choices: a subject he had learned the importance of while eagerly reading the book given to him by his mentor Gehman, years before.

Predictably Mr. Flowers was pleased with Mr. Boyer’s work, and thanked him and his mother profusely. Two months later, Mr. Boyer received a call from the Reading Times that he, along with 25 other boys, was selected to participate in a 2 week long bus trip to all of the New England States and three major cities in Canada (Ottawa, Ontario and Montreal): all expenses paid! The criteria for this selection included who was able to get the most subscriptions, fewest complaints, as well as who was able to collect the money on time. And so Mr. Boyer soon found himself embarking on a trip that he could never otherwise had imagined. He remembers eating at fine restaurants for the first time. At one point he was asked by a server how he would like his steak. Mr. Boyer had never considered the question before, never having had the opportunity. After asking the server to list the options, he guessed when he requested “Medium Rare”. Luckily for him, it worked and it became a permanent steak preference.

If life is about choices, than Mr. Boyer succeeded in understanding the value of making the right ones. In a choice that seemed perhaps initially marginal, joining the Olivet became a choice that would reward him for
the rest of his life. And if Mr. Boyer had done it for the rewards perhaps this would have been a much
different story. But Mr. Boyer was a member of the Olivet for the sheer purposes of wanting to be a part of it. He was happy there, learning how to be physically active and play different kinds of sports. He was safe there, forming a community where his friends and he looked out for each other. Mr. Boyer learned about choices and in life’s most trying or opportunistic moments he made good ones. He kept up his grades, he worked odd jobs from as early as 10 years old. Later on his life, Mr. Boyer brought his own kids to the Olivet so that they could experience what he had years ago. Mr. Boyer is the result of wanton good, in an environment that may otherwise had challenged his incentives, perverted his energy. But instead, Mr. Boyer joined the Olivet, and sitting with the winning baseball of 1967 in his Wyomissing home 54 years later, he recalls the beauty and pleasure of his youth.
Frank Brown

by Ellise Brady

Frank Brown was born in Harrisburg, PA in 1965. He did not always live in Pennsylvania. His family moved to California in 1972 after hurricane Agnes destroyed his family’s home. He went to elementary school in Compton, California and then moved back to Pennsylvania where he attended Northwest Junior High School. Frank was in sixth grade when his mom made him join the Olivet Boy’s Club in 1977. He attended the club until 1981 when he was in 10th grade. He and his family then moved to New Haven, Connecticut where he graduated from James Hillhouse High School in 1983.

Frank’s mom was the reason he was a member of what was then called the Olivet Boys Club. She wanted him to meet people and make new friends. He was happy that she made him join because he absolutely loved it! At the club he played pool, learned how to swim, and raced AFX cars. Frank can remember his first day at the club like it was yesterday. On his first day at the club he remembers being very nervous. One of the guys running the unit at the time named Marv asked Frank if he knew how to play pool. Marv played pool with Frank and from there he met new people and made lots of friends.

The swimming pool was his favorite part about the club. He can still remember how small it was. “We used to play tag. If I was in the pool and another kid would jump in and touch me, then I was it. It was so much fun!” There were mats where Frank and the other kids would play basketball often. The rule was not to jump off the mats to dunk. They jumped off of them every chance they got of course. One time he did it; he jumped off the mats to dunk. Frank got caught in the act of course and got kicked out of the club for two days. He said those two days felt like an eternity to him. When he got kicked out of the club for those two days it made him realize that the club offers a lot. When he was a kid he said, “We did not have Xbox, and our TV’s had bunny ears. There was not much to keep us occupied.” Without the club it was boring. The club taught him that if he did not want to follow the rules there were consequences that would follow his actions.

The club kept Frank out of trouble as a kid. His mom never told him that if you do not get A’s you cannot go to the club. While in the club he learned that he had an athletic ability. He joined in on the sports that were offered and from that he realized that he was a good basketball player. Winning trophies gave him a lot of confidence. The club allowed him to use his talents instead of letting them go to waste. Frank earned a full basketball scholarship and earned a BS Degree in Accounting from the University of Bridgeport. In 2011 he was inducted into the Athletic Hall of Fame. In 199 he received his MBA from the University of New Haven. Frank said that if his mom had not made him join the club it definitely would have had a negative effect on him.

When he was in the club there were no girls in it, it was a boys club at the time. He feels that girls can benefit from the club today just as much as the boys benefit from it. Seeing a lot of young girls with babies today he feels like the club could prevent that from happening. Frank said that the biggest change he has noticed was
that the club has grown. When he was a member there was only one unit and now there are about six or seven units. There were no resources such as a library, or anything to do with art when he was in the club. The Glenside unit today where he mentors has things like arts and crafts, and computers. Keeping the teenagers out of trouble and interested in the club is the reason he is helping.

Frank has sat on the board for the club for a few years. Helping out with the club and being involved with the kids is very rewarding to him. He is proud of what the club has grown to become. Frank does a lot of mentoring now at the Glenside unit still believing in what the club stands for. Being a part of the club himself made him want to give back. Today he still keeps in touch with the friends that he made when he was in the club. They still talk about the club and remember stories like they were there only yesterday. The club has affected his life in a huge, positive way. He said, “The key is to have good role models.” It is important to give these kids a good message and reach out to help them which are things he still does to this day.
Wynton Butler Narrative

by Megan McLaughlin

I had the pleasure of interviewing Wynton Butler, an attendee of The Olivet Boys and Girls Club in Reading during the years of 1979, 1980, and 1981. He spoke of the incredible impact being involved with The Olivet Boys and Girls Club, as a child, has had on his life. The Olivet Boys and Girls Club definitely kept Wynton out of trouble during his schooling years. Before being involved in the Club, Wynton was barely allowed out of the house, living in a more dangerous part of Reading, Pennsylvania. He recalls how his father was always very concerned about where he was spending his free time. Once he was attending The Olivet Boys and Girls Club, his father knew Wynton was safe and sound, saying that after school he had been at the Club.

As a young person, Wynton enjoyed the times he spent at the swimming pool with his friends as well as being involved in the sports at the Club. He talked a lot about his experiences being involved in basketball and baseball, playing for The Olivet Boys and Girls Club. Through his involvement on the basketball team he had the opportunities of traveling around the state as well as out of state, being able to see different perspectives of the world. Having the opportunity to travel made Wynton realize that there was more to the world than what was right under his feet. His scope broadened, and he started to notice there was more to life than where he lived. Mr. Butler recalls that other children at his school who were not involved in the Club would be shocked to find that he was traveling to different places, realizing that their whole life was made up of more than the streets Schuylkill to 13th street. Some of the children he had gone to school with had not even been to the mall before. Wynton said, “Many [of his] friends would be dead or in jail if it [hadn’t have been] for the Olivet Club.”

Mr. Butler spent about two and a half hours at the Club per day during a three year period of time. The biggest impact of being in the Club was the relationships he made with the adults and leaders that were there. The way the adults carried themselves, indirectly, taught the children how to behave. These adults stressed the importance of education and achieving good grades. He recalls them saying that the children, “had to have a good education to do well in life.”

Wynton spoke excitedly about his experiences playing on the baseball team for The Olivet Club. He remembers his team was 0-44 and was threatened to be kicked out of the league. His leader fought for their baseball team saying at a meeting, “if [the children] weren’t playing baseball, what else would they be doing?” Because of this, the board voted them to stay in the league, and they got new uniforms and more. Playing on the baseball team was one of Wynton’s more exciting experiences at the Club.

Wynton Butler then attended Kutztown University for his undergraduate degree, and went on to the military. Mr. Butler continued on to be the principal at Reading High School and is now the director of social services. He contributes much of his success to being involved in Olivet and tries to give back by visiting the children who are in the Club now. Mr. Butler developed a sense of giving back from the leaders that gave him so much wisdom when he was young. He feels like he owes it to the children now to go back and convince them
to do the right things in life. Wynton has helped with the Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration at the Club for 10-15 years. This is a day of reflection for the children: reading and becoming educated on the impact Martin Luther King Jr. has had on the world, going beyond what one would read in books.

Overall, Wynton feels extremely blessed, having the chance of being involved in the Olivet Boys and Girls Club. He tries as much as he can to give back to Olivet because he knows the impact they are having on many children.
Kevin Devera Narrative

by Mirla Cornielles

With 25 years of experience, Kevin Devera is the Impact Director for Health, Wellness, and Athletics at the Olivet Boys and Girls club. In these years he’s seen it all while being provided with countless opportunities. He was given the chance to travel as well as train in the field he loves, impact the next generation of kids, and see success stories vs. people who weren’t as lucky. All of these things have helped him grow as a person, and this is reflected by his career.

Kevin’s career has been growing for the last 25 years. Kevin has had the opportunity to travel the country within his job at the Olivet. He’s gone as far as California and San Diego, and as close as Allentown—all in search of knowledge to help him better his students and himself. Going along with his job, the training sessions he went through, such as his most recent training for Badges 7 Baseball National Training in Ohio, were mostly athletically oriented. Overall he has done 8 different trainings all in motivation to accomplish one of his biggest endeavors: establishing the opening of 7 of the Olivet Boys and Girls Clubs in Reading PA.

His work has been recognized by the community in many ways. He is the frequent recipient of honors such as the Caron Foundation’s Unsung Hero Award for his promotion of HIV & AIDS awareness. He was a national finalist for the Honor Awards in Program Excellence in the core program area of Health and Life Skills and in 2015 he was named the “King of Baseballtown” for his contribution to the sport of baseball in the city of Reading, Pa.

Kevin has a nickname among the kids at Olivet Boys and Girls Club “Mr. Phun” and if this nickname doesn’t describe his impact to Olivet and his community I don’t know what does. Kevin has even had old members of the club come and introduce their kids to him. He says: “They always realize that their best time was in the club”. He’s seen a lot of success stories but unfortunately he has also seen the opposite as well. Even with those sad cases when I ask Kevin if he sees the positive influence that the Olivet has made on the community he answers with a confident yes. The Olivet does all it can to provide their kids with a bright future. As an example he mentions how the Olivet now provides scholarships to Alvernia. Along with new technology that they are including in their clubs. All in hopes to motivate kids to want to learn new things. A club he helped open up in now has tablets and an expansive music section which he feels very proud of.

Kevin fondly references an event he attended where they took 30 kids to a princess party and dressed them up. As he recalls this he’s beaming from ear to ear and talks about how these girls don’t have those types of experiences at home. He’s very happy that his company can provide those crucial experiences to these girls.

Besides his occupation Kevin is a self-taught drummer and a very passionate sportsman. Within these fields he’s had big accomplishments. For example, he was a music teacher in 1987-1989 in the Reading School District. He also helped establish the construction of Gordon Hoodak Stadium at Lauer’s Park Elementary
School in collaboration with the Reading Phillies. These experiences and many more have helped fine tune his skills as Impact Director for Health, Wellness and Athletics.

Overall Kevin describes himself as a “Product of the City of Reading”. Furthering his motivation in doing the job that he does. He believes in the City of Reading and in its kids. Through all of his trainings, life experiences, and personal motivations he has succeeded at being an asset to the Olivet for 25 years. And how would he describe his experience generally? He says “I have one of the greatest jobs on the planet.”
Stephan Fains Narrative

by Heleanna Davison

“No matter how hard it was at home it didn’t matter it didn’t give you the right to mess up. Yea you got it rough at home but people here love you so come here and be respectful to us, we will help you. This is a needed place.” –Stephan Fains

The Olivet Boys and Girls Club is a place where children of the Reading Pennsylvania area can go to stay off the street, and to find themselves as they develop from childhood to young adulthood. This was the case for Stephan Fains, a young twelve year old boy who had just moved out of the projects of Reading needing a place to stay out of trouble. He had an older brother, who focused on his basketball career. His mother was very supportive of his brother’s growing talents. She also supported Stephan in all of his endeavors. Stephan, becoming his own person, wanted to go to a place where he could become himself. Stephan didn’t find Olivet, Olivet found him. The Club meant a lot to him as a person. He still is in contact with many of the people he had met through the Olivet. The Olivet became family instead of a place to go.

Olivet became a home away from home. Days after school were spent playing games such as chess, ping pong, even things like bumper pool. This was the first time Stephan was able to interact with these games. The one game that Stephan longed for the end of the school day was the game of basketball. Olivet meant everything, and this place taught Stephan and his playmates respect, respect for each other and for the equipment. They had to take care of the center because no one was going to do that for them. Olivet was also a place where Stephan could stay out of trouble; his mother and grandmother would know where he would be and when he would be home. The Olivet became a fatherly figure to Stephan, where a few men had a great impact on Stephan as he was transitioning from boy to teen.

Two men stood out among the others: David Gilmore and Brian Ellison. David Gilmore had the greatest impact on Stephan. David showed respect but was also hard on the kids. No matter how old or young you were he let you know that you were responsible for you; for everything you say and do. If you were disrespectful he said “grab your coat” and told you to leave. You didn’t argue, you left; you knew what you did wrong and he let you know. Even if you were young you had to be respectful. He would say, “I’m not your baby sitter you can enjoy being at the Olivet or leave.” David knew Stephan growing up. He saw Stephan going through a transition; he knew Stephan’s family and what he was dealing with. David always pulled Stephan to the side and asked, “how you doing? Seems like you got a lot on your mind.” David was there for Stephan when he needed him. Brian Ellison was the coach for the Olivet basketball team. “He didn’t take no mess, he was a coach like Bobby Knight; he would rip you up but not in a disrespectful way. In a way that was challenging. He was full of intensity.” Stephan never valued it as if Brian was being hard, but as if Brian knew he could do better. Stephan never viewed it as a bad thing; Brian taught him respect and
responsibility for a team. “You could try and play a game of basketball by yourself and you might win. However, when you work as a team and you all play with your heart and soul every time you step onto that court and put that ball in your hand, the world is no longer just yours, just you as a person, but as six different people all playing to win.” These two men had a great impact on Stephan as he grew into the man he is today.

Today Stephan gives back to the Olivet. He worked at the Olivet for five years. He visits every weekend he can with his own children, spending time with the children. When working with these children he believes that one needs a lot of time and patience. It isn’t easy but this is the first time some of these kids are learning respect. These kids do whatever they want at home but here, at the Olivet, they can’t. They learn to treat this place like it is something of theirs because it is theirs. This is their building; there is no sense of stealing from here. They are just hurting themselves. Stephan says, “You have to show these kids that drug dealers aren’t the only ones who have nice things. If you work hard then you can have them too. That’s what they think because the hustlers are the only ones that have the money and stuff.” Stephan tries to change that view.
Michael Farrara Narrative

by Grace Duran-Castaing

Michael Farrara is a retired teacher from the Wyomissing Area School District who taught Industrial Arts, now known as Technology Education, for 33 years. Michael, who grew up with his older brother Andy and his younger brother Phillip, enjoyed the many perks and sometimes disadvantages of being a middle child. He became active in the Boys and Girls Olivet Club in 1960, at the age of four, and frequently attended the meetings and get-togethers of the Boys and Girls Club located on Tulpehocken and Oley Streets. Michael, himself, as well as his brothers, mother, and aunt were highly involved in the Club. Michael was a slot car champion; both of his brothers won Boy of the Year awards. His mother and aunt helped in the kitchen. Around Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, the ladies who worked in the kitchen such as Michael’s mother and aunt, would cook and sell food to the community for the purpose of gathering money for future events. Phillip mentioned during our interview that “They kept the Olivet going. They would make food and sell it and that’s how we got money to do things at the Olivet.”

When I asked Michael to tell me a little bit about his experience and what he looked forward to at the Olivet, his response was “I loved it, because we would come home from school and we’d go to the Olivet’s. I was into slot car racing; we had a six lane, 24 foot slot car track, so we would race little cars that were about 2’ long and that’s what I looked forward to everyday”. From the age of 12 until his last years of high school, Michael was highly involved with the race track and enjoyed car racing immensely, but once he went to college, he faded away from the Olivet due to the distance and the change in his environment. When I asked Michael, what are his most vivid memories of the Olivet he said “the old gym upstairs, the walls were out of bounds during basketball games. I remember having banquets up there at the end of the year. Both of my brothers won the Olivet Boy of the Year award. I didn’t win the Boy of the Year, but I was a slot car champion.”

As I mentioned before, Michael was highly involved in the Olivet Club, he was slot car champion, and he was also a pinsetter at the local bowling alley. Reliving his old memories, he recalls, “we also had a bowling alley that I liked, I was a pin setter. We had two lanes. When you’d push your foot in the back under the lane, the 10 steel pins came up, allowing the bowling pins to be reset. We’d hop up on the wall after setting the pins up and the guys would roll the ball real fast. Every once in a while you’d get hit by the pins.” He described this experience as being fun, even though it was a lot of work.

Michael felt like his experience at the Olivet Club kept him and his brothers out of trouble. To promote a productive lifestyle, the Olivet Club had a police officer come in and talk to them about the dangers of drugs, guns, and violence. Furthermore, they had many key figures and inspirational people within the Club who kept him and his brothers on the right track. Michael mentioned someone by the name of Marv Gehman, (also known as Marvin Mercer, a former professional wrestler known for his Atomic drop kick), saying, “Nobody ever fooled around, as all of the boys were scared of him, so we knew better not to mess around.” The brothers also described their counselor, Cy Brobst, as someone they looked up to with tough love saying,
“if you caused trouble, you’d be disciplined at the Olivet, and when you’d go home, you’d be in trouble again, this time with your parents.”

As Andy, the oldest brother mentioned, these were the people who kept them out of trouble and away from the gangs and violence on the streets, allowing them to have a better lifestyle than that of many of the people around them, who were not boys from the Olivet Club.
Tom Faust Sr. Narrative

by Katrina Undheim

Tom Faust, Sr., owner of TG Faust, Inc., a company manufacturing bullet-proof vests, attended the Olivet Boys and Girls Club from 1948 until 1953. He was 11 through 15 years old. His main activity while he was there was playing basketball. He loved to play basketball there with the coach at the time, Danny Trout. Danny Trout had a big impact on his life and took Faust and the other boys there under his wing. He taught them the game of basketball, and taught it well. Many of the boys, including Tom Faust, Sr. went on to play basketball in high school on the varsity team. Not only did he teach them the game, he taught them character. Tom Faust, Sr. learned a lot from Trout, stating that Trout was what made his experience with the Boys & Girls Club so memorable. He also says that when he was there, the game was just fun, although they did play against other Clubs and local teams. Now, he says, the coaches push the kids and “overdo” it with practice. Tom Faust still loves the game of basketball and was even playing into his sixties. He also still meets with his friends that he attended Olivet with every month for breakfast. Many of his friends, like him, became prominent members of the community. The Club taught them to be upstanding men, and they learned manners. “They sent you home if you were wearing a baseball cap, sometimes for two or three days at a time until you came back without it,” Faust says.

Faust’s children were and are still involved in the Club. His son attended the Club and his daughter, Camille, now works there. He says it is still a good place for today’s generation. It keeps kids off the streets and teaches them other skills and tactics instead of fighting, because if they get into fights, they get sent home. The kids who attend the Club now are learning many of the same things Faust learned while he was there, including how to build character. As stated, they still play basketball, but they do not have Tom’s favorite coach Danny Trout to coach them and take them under his wing as one of his own. Tom Faust really enjoyed his attendance at the Olivet Boys & Girls Club, and it is a memory he has cherished for a lifetime.
Wanda Flores Narrative

by Nicole Tavares

Wanda Flores is currently a teacher at Governor Mifflin Intermediate School, a career which she loves and is incredibly passionate about. After attending Reading Area Community College for two years, she transferred to Alvernia University and continued on the path of becoming a teacher. Her hard work and determination earned her a bachelor’s degree and the prestigious honor of being named Teacher of the Year. She didn’t stop there; later on she attended Wilkes University and earned her master’s degree.

Her parents, both minorities (Puerto Ricans), had a great impact in her life, and even though they didn’t finish school, they placed a strong emphasis on getting a good education. In the 1990’s Wanda lived in Reading, Pennsylvania, in the Oakbrook projects, where she was introduced to The Olivet Boys and Girls Club. Having a very strict family, she remembers having to be home when the streetlights went on. The Olivet Club was the only place she was allowed to go. In the club she found everything she could ever ask for; a place to have a good time with friends and amazing people to look up to. “The club played a big part in who I am today. I was surrounded by positive caring role models that guided me in the right direction. I am grateful for all those mentors that took the time to plant the seed about going to college and helping me make it a reality.” Wanda was the first in her family to earn a bachelor’s degree, followed by her older brother, also an original club member from Olivet, who went on to serve our country in the Marines. Aside from academics, the club was a way of keeping kids from the community off the street.

The club offered a variety of programs including homework help, sports, and educational programs. Wanda in particular was involved in a program called Smart Moves; this was a drug and alcohol and teenage pregnancy prevention. “This really opened my eyes to the dangers of substance abuse related topics”. Not only were there activities, but also the club participants were taken places outside of the club. Wanda talks about how she went to her first professional basketball game to see the 76ers and being in a United Way commercial. During the years she participated in the club, she had many accomplishments. Not only was she the first Oakbrook member to receive the Youth of the Year award, but she was also the first girl. “As I look back and reflect on those club experiences, the most memorable thing I can think of is that the club gave me hope; hope that I could have a successful future. I didn’t have to become a statistic in the projects working dead end jobs. That there was more out there for me if I was willing to go and get it. It wasn’t going to be easy, but it would to be worth it.”

Wanda doesn’t always meet with her old friends but when she does it is like they never were apart. She said she made some really good friends. “I was more of a tomboy, so I was always with the boys, you know less drama.” (Laughs). The only friend she always keeps in contact is a male, Kevin; she talks about how he was a great friend and continues to be. “Not long ago I helped him with his RBI baseball program.” Another person that means a lot to her was one of the staff members from the club, David. “I looked up to him, he gave me hope. I always told myself if he did it I can also do it.” Aside from being a mentor he was a great person to share with. “He was the one that taught me how to play pool.”
“A lot has changed since I went to the club. It started in a small room and now Oakbrook has a beautiful facility and offers many more programs allowing them to help more families.” The Olivet Boys and Girls Club was the only club in her neighborhood by that time, the other clubs were too far away in order for her to go. But this was the perfect one for her, maybe if the place would’ve been different the experiences also would’ve changed and she wouldn’t be the person she is today. “Other kids’ experiences may have been different because those kids didn’t live in the same neighborhood, not giving them much to share in common.”
Emmett Lien Narrative

by Andrew Russano

From 1970 through 1977 Emmett Lien was one of many children enrolled in the Olivet Boys and Girls Club of Reading. Emmett was 11 years old when his dad enrolled him in the club for $1.25. This seems like such an incredibly low cost for enrollment in such a life changing club, but reality is that $1.25 to families in Inner-City Reading during the 1970’s was not pocket change. Olivet was and still is a place for young people to grow and learn in a safe environment while being taught valuable life lessons.

Emmett’s first job came when he was enrolled in Olivet. In the 1970’s, fancy pin setting machines were not yet installed at the bowling alley in which the club used, so the members of the club were paid to sit on a ledge behind the pins, and then reset them as people bowled, as well as throw the balls back. When asked why his job was so important to him, simply responded that it was the “beginning of responsibilities . . . if you were signed up to do the noon game, you better be in the pit by noon.” As stated, having that first job at the club taught him responsibility. This was one of many things that Olivet stressed to all of its members; everything was done for a reason. Jobs like the one Emmett held were there to build responsibility and character. Sports like baseball, which he played when he was 14, heavily encouraged young men the importance of team work, as well as the significance of communication skills. One point that he stressed more than any other was that everyone was entitled to respect. And there were consequences for those who did not acting accordingly. Suspensions from the club and sitting people out from activities was and still are common consequences for those that do not follow the main rules of the club.

“Those are formative years from eleven to sixteen, seventeen, and I don’t think you can spend as much time as we did in that organization without pointing out that it absolutely contributed to success,” Emmett explained. Success is the key element that everyone strives for in life, and Mr. Lien is by no means a stranger to the meaning of success. As the current president of Edge Insights, as well as former manager of the most profitable branch of GE Capital ITS-PA in the world, and founder of WorldNet Technology Consultants, Emmett whole heartedly believes that his time at Olivet directly influenced his work ethic and character. The second decade of one’s life is arguably the most important time in anyone’s life. The people at Olivet are more than aware of this, and do everything they can to enable each and every member to grow and learn valuable lessons that cannot be taught in school.

Olivet has been a safe place for boys and girls to go to learn for years. While groups like the YMCA often faded in cities throughout the country, Olivet stood as a permanent and lasting institution for youth. This is directly due to the strong culture and belief in the club that has been passed from generation to generation. Jeff Palmer, Emmett’s baseball coach in the 1970’s, was also part of the club. He, according to Emmett, was 21 when he started coaching, and just recently stepped down as Executive Director of the club. Like many others, Palmer is one of many who have been involved with Olivet for decades. This dedication shows the level of love that people have for the club, and why the mentality has not changed.
Emmett is still involved with the club to this day. He attends fundraising events, and enjoys going back a couple days out of the week to play basketball with his friends that he made while he was a young member at Olivet. Even forty years after enrolling, members are still getting together to celebrate great friendships, and enjoy the same facilities they adored as kids. Olivet has touched so many lives since its start in 1898, and continues to do so as its legacy grows. It has become a symbol of fun and character development, but it also has demonstrated the importance of teamwork, respect, and communication. And with those fundamental building blocks, Olivet will continue to be a success for years to come.
Nelson Leon Narrative

by Xezania G. Pitts

As the Assistant Director of the Mulberry Street unit of the Olivet Boys & Girls Club, twenty-five-year-old Nelson Leon does more than help facilitate programs and set up meetings. He is one of the staff members who makes an impact on the lives of youth every day.

Though having worked for Olivet for the past nine years, Leon was a member since he was eight-years-old. Growing up a shy kid who obtained good grades in a strict household, he claims that being involved in Olivet was the only thing he was allowed to do. Beginning his Olivet employment as a lifeguard, Leon also played for the Club’s basketball team, to which he attributes his athletic involvement and success in later years.

He mentioned various programs that taught young boys like himself without father figures what it means to be a man. These opportunities are what helped him to become who he is today. Club programs like Passport to Manhood organize youths into small-group sessions that concentrate on promoting and teaching responsibility while reinforcing positive behavior. Others include: Healthy Habits – teaching kids the benefits of living active and eating healthy, Bookworms – helping struggling readers in first through third grades, College Access – a program supported by Alvernia University’s Holleran Center which “provides full tuition scholarships for Club members who want to attend [the university] and meet their requirements”. Primarily the program provides mentors, like Ms. Myrna Fuchs, who help high school students “learn about financial aid, take them on tours of colleges and universities, and walk them step-by-step through the application process.”

When asked what the biggest difference between Olivet when he was a member and now that he is part of the Club staff, Leon said the approach was different, but the same effect and outcomes are produced by the program. For him, Olivet was a home away from home. He always wanted to be there. He also agrees that the diversity of the facility, though considered the norm in the Reading demographic, also influences his success in reaching the kids. Most of the youth he works with in the Mulberry unit are of Hispanic descent and/or come from a single-parent household, statistics he fell into growing up in Olivet. Specifically, the Club advertises that their demographic consists of 46% Hispanics, 26% African-Americans, 20% Multi-racial and 8% Whites, with 56% being male and 44% female. But overall, 84% of the youths live at or below the national poverty line.

As a result of these similarities he shares with the kids, he finds it particularly important not to approach the kids as an “authority figure” since many of the boys in the Club have problems with authority/rules and carry an air of stubbornness. He says that many of the boys come in feeling as though they have something to prove. As a mentor, Leon tries to help those kids who come in with an attitude, or who do not want to follow rules, “the ones who never smile.” He pledges that it is his job to figure out where the source of the anger comes from and tries to “tap into their hearts” in some way, whether it be through sports, conversation or homework help. According to Leon, it takes longer now to reach kids than it did in his time at Olivet.
because of all the negativity they watch on TV, see in their schools, hear in mainstream music and witness in the streets. Twelve-year-olds can come and go as they please. The lack of discipline and not having parents who are involved in the kids’ lives or care about where they are or what they do is why Leon believes most of the youth are worse off than he was. Olivet is a place they can go and be reminded that they do have the potential to be somebody and do not have to fall into the statistics, as he struggled not to when he was a youth member.

Growing up he remembers the biggest challenge for the non-profit organization was not receiving help or connections from the community, schools or parents. Now, Olivet Club staff members go out and seek help, knocking from door to door and cooperating with educative facilities. The schools now facilitate the Day for Kids with the Intermediate school. The parents provide donations for programs and field trips. From the community, the Olivet Boys & Girls Club is increasing in membership, volunteer involvement and recognition, helping to encourage kids to see past their adversities and reach their highest potential.

Leon did his best to overcome his obstacles, recounting one memorable experience that changed his mindset: winning the Olivet Boys & Girls Club’s Youth of the Year Award in 2006 through the Keystone/Torch Club for teens. This award is given to a youth who demonstrates the highest “character and leadership development (program), makes positive decisions, volunteers in the community, and [shows] a growth in self-confidence” (100 Years of Hope & Community). Winning this senior award as a sophomore allowed him to attend various National Conferences for the Club and inspired Leon to want more for himself. His success in the Club as a member encouraged him to join the staff later in life. As a staff member, his most moving experiences are when kids spend their last $2 to buy him something or invite him and his coworkers to attend their sports games and extracurricular activities. He claims that it is “rewarding to make an impact”, being a consistent and influential person for all the youth in the facility, showing them that the staff care about their achievements.

Furthermore, Leon adds that for discipline reinforcement in the sports program, to encourage educational development, and to show support to the youth on an individual level, the staff collect report cards from the kids. They sit down with them and talk about their problems and identify how certain programs can aid in their success. He adds, the best way to help them reach their potential is to lead by example, which he did by going back to school and taking up business management classes at Reading Area’s Community College (RACC). Growing up, he lacked the resources, assistance and guidance to further his education, but by doing it himself he is showing the kids the importance of education and how it can positively impact their lives. He says, “you have to believe in it for the kids to believe in it.”

Overall, Leon believes the Olivet Boys & Girls Club “enables all young people, especially those who need [those] most, to reach their full potential as healthy, productive, caring, responsible citizens,” staying true to their mission statement. He advocates that Olivet is a place where kids feel they can belong. They can build confidence, realize and maximize their potential, and grow as people. He believes everyone should be involved in the Club as it helps shape underprivileged kids, allowing them to have fun while learning in the process. But most of all, the greatest advantage of being involved in the Olivet Club, in his opinion, is having an extended family and building lifelong relationships that can last a lifetime. He says, “you can always
come to the Club and get help.”
Matt Mish Narrative

by Nicole Straka

Matt Mish joined the Clinton Street program of the Olivet Boys and Girls Club located in the City of Reading at the age of six in 1985. He lived on Gordon Street just two blocks away and remembers dribbling his basketball down the street numerous times. He attended northwest Elementary and middle school until his family moved to the Wilson area for his high school years. His parents would still drive him to the Olivets a few times a week just to be with his friends. He became an active participant in the programs offered to youth until the age of 18 years. Matt followed a family line that included several generations of Olivet Club members, his grandfather, father and brothers being among those attending. The Club became a “second home” for Matt and his family members and friends.

Matt attended school during the day and went to the Olivets to do his homework and to play basketball at night. Matt Mish and the other boys would play basketball games along with other members of other area Olivet clubs and RBI leagues that Kevin Devera, an Olivet supervisor, arranged for the boys. One of his most memorable moments he recalls is when he and the boys traveled to the Bronx to play in a three day basketball tournament competition in Kip’s Bay Club. He was playing amongst some of the players who were highly recruited in the league. It was also a special time for him since it was his first time being in New York City. He was able to see some of the attractions the city offered as well as see the Twin Towers which are no longer standing.

Matt remembers being taken on field trips which included a WWF wrestling match and Reading Phillies games. Not only was the club centered on a basketball program it had but the Club also offered arts and crafts as well for the children to do while attending the club, once their homework was completed. The Olivet center on Clinton Street that Matt attended had a bowling alley in it that most did not have the privilege to have.

After being part of the program growing up, Matt came back to work for the Olivets after graduating high school. It was his very first job and he was in charge of monitoring the gym area. He continued to work into his college days. He continued to work for the Olivets as well as a lifeguard at The Blue mountain camp. Matt originally attended college at Kutztown University to become elementary education teacher, a major that was more or less forced upon him by his parents. He told them this was not the major for him and switched to Criminal Justice. His original goal was to work with probation or parole. Becoming a police officer was not a priority but he decided to take the Reading police civil service test and was one of the few that passed among his peers. Unfortunately he could not attend his graduation ceremony because that date the test took place. He started as a patrol officer in the City of Reading and now is a detective for the same police department.

Matt strongly credits Olivet with keeping him on track as a youth. Without having them as a second home and part of his life, he would not know where he would be. He is grateful for his memories he has made that
the club gave him that he can share his experiences with his own family and friends. He credits the Olivets for his guidance in not ending up in life like some of his friends whose life took a different and unfortunately wrong path. The Olivet Boys and Girls Club is one of the positive things available for youth in the City of Reading. It offers opportunities within a safe environment for the children to expand their educational needs with extracurricular activities for them.

Matt feels clubs like Olivet should be available in more counties for the children. He feels very positive about what the Club offers so much so, that he earmarks his annual United Way donation directly to support the Olivet programs to keep it up and running for the future youth to still have the same opportunities if not more for them.
Kathia Montanez Narrative

by Meaghan Schickling

Kathia Montanez of Reading, Pennsylvania has a unique perspective regarding the changes and progressions the Olivet Boys and Girls Club has undergone over the years. Ms. Montanez was once a member of the Club, and now at age twenty-two, she plays another more involved role given her professional involvement at Olivet. Kathia is now a leader, being part of the staff at the same Olivet Club she once attended as a child, not too far from her home on Mulberry Street.

Kathia had earlier joined a similar club called Path, which was just around the corner from the home where she lived at age seven. She then switched to the Mulberry location when her family moved a short time later, and has been there ever since both as a member and later as a staff associate. When Kathia first started attending the club in the early 2000’s, she found that it was extremely unorganized- and in her words “…all over the place and very chaotic”- and definitely did not present a professional setting. Adding to the chaos, her peers came from all over the Reading area and the staff didn’t always perform their jobs in the proper manner. The club lacked something it really needed, and Kathia described that something as structure.

Things began to change at the Olivet Club with new directors coming onboard and introducing a new direction for the club. The future started looking brighter for the Mulberry Olivet Club once Candy, the newest club director, arrived several years ago. In Kathia’s view, Candy really turned things around by making significant changes. The programs and the rules that they now follow have structure and purpose. Kathia went on to say that is really a good thing, allowing the club to keep progressing and hopefully, more adolescents will be recruited in the future and encouraged to join.

Growing up as a club member, Kathia most enjoyed being a part of the drill team. Today she loves working in the gym with the kids, bringing them together by playing games like Steal the Bacon and Four Corners. She finds that having them play these games as a group helps them to get along better with one another. For only ten dollars a month, these children are provided with dinner, receive help with their homework and are offered many other educational programs. The staff understands these kids are in school all day, and try to make the programs as enjoyable as possible so the kids will continue to attend. In addition to the “fun things”, the club also has teachers from Reading High School come in to speak with the older students about the importance of attending college, how to prepare for SAT test, etc. Today, the staff strives to keep these inner city kids off the streets, providing them a welcoming second home, and the required help to insure they succeed with their future goals.

Kathia, maybe more than others, found the Olivet Club to be a home away from home. As she and her peers started getting older many of them began drifting away from the club. She continued as a member even after most dropped out because they felt they were too good to keep attending. Many of them felt embarrassed to go back to the club, as if they were too cool for it. Kathia loved the club and never allowed others’ opinions to influence her into thinking otherwise. While many went their own way, Kathia stayed focused on her
education and valued the help she was receiving from the club.

Sticking with the club really paid off for Kathia when she was awarded *Junior Youth of the Year* award in 2008. While many candidates get awarded for simply being the best they can be, Kathia truly deserved this award for always helping out at the club and continuing to become deeply involved in the educational programs.

Kathia’s hard work and dedication paid off, but even with her continued involvement with the club and recognition as Junior Youth of the Year, Kathia was left feeling empty and lost after her father’s sudden death. Kathia looked at the club as her support system when she was feeling sad and hopeless. The first person she called after rushing her father to the hospital was Candy, the club director whom she so admires. She didn’t go back to Olivet for a short time following her father’s death, yet the support system at the club remained there for her every step of the way. Candy and the staff at the Mulberry Olivet helped Kathia through one of the hardest times she had ever experienced up to that point, and kept her busy when she finally did return to the club. There wasn’t a moment she wasn’t assigned to do something, a tactic that helped keep her mind off the difficult things she was dealing with. The staff members at Olivet cared and showed her that; the club helped her to keep her head up and spirits high.

Kathia has lived a hectic life, dealing with many ups and downs as most of us do. But unlike many others Kathia has learned to stay true to herself and keep balanced. After her father’s death she learned to take advantage of every opportunity because she felt that you’ll never know when it could be your last. Kathia, still working at Olivet, is also certified in cosmetology and massage therapy. She is doing everything she can to support herself and her beautiful one year old daughter. Kathia wouldn’t have been able to make it through these ups and downs without all the loving support she receives from the Olivet Club. As a sheltered child, the only daughter among four siblings, the club was one of the few places Kathia was allowed to go and it became a getaway for her. Kathia is glad she had the opportunity to fall back on the club for support and is still able to call it her second home. She has come a long way because of Olivet and the support they have given her. She loved being able to go there to help distract her from life’s problems and not have to always be stuck at home.

Kathia has wonderful memories of Olivet that shall be cherished for a lifetime.
The Olivet Boys and Girls Club is known for providing children with a safe and happy environment to spend their time in. However, the club can have a much bigger effect on these kids than just providing them with a nice place to hang out. The Club can really help shape these kids’ lives and help turn them into successful individuals.

Dr. Michael Moyer attended the Olivet Boys Club from the age of seven and well into his teen years. From the 1950s until about 1965, Moyer attended the club three to four times a month. With nothing but fond memories, he talks about the impact the club had on him and the major influence it had on his life.

“The Club was an old converted church.” Recalls Moyer. He remembered downstairs was a recreational room with a floor below which contained two showers. The recreational room contained a shuffle board and table tennis, which he remembered as being quite fun. The upstairs was a basketball court which also contained a stage. Although it could be quite crowded at times, Moyer felt that “It was a safe environment, and there was always something to do.”

While at the club, basketball was one activity that occupied a great deal of his time. Moyer was part of the in house basketball league and played with many different individuals. He recalled playing with a young boy named Bill who was an extremely good dribbler who actually went on to be an all-star basketball player. The other boys would try and get the ball away while Bill dribbled it around. Moyer also remembers being part of a summer baseball league and playing checkers with a boy named Joey. The experience with sports taught him about winning and losing and how to handle each. He thought the fact that he got to play with so many boys of different ethnicities was a positive experience.

Being able to keep busy had a huge impact on Moyer. The large number of activities the Club had greatly affected his future endeavors. The “general idea of physical activity” and just staying active pushed him toward his future career. He started out with a degree in health and physical education. Moyer is now a kinesiology professor at Penn State Berks. He believes that his participation in so many activities and constantly staying busy had a huge effect on him and helped shape his life into what it is today.
by Jamie Scott

Imagine landing your dream job right out of college. For Jeffrey M. Palmer this dream came true. Jeffrey M. Palmer was born in 1951 and raised in Reading, Pa. He had graduated from Reading Senior High School in 1969. As a student at Reading High School he was a member of the football and golf team. After high school he continued his education at West Chester University and was a member of football, golf, and cross-country team. During his junior year Jeff was offered an ideal job at a place he had called home many years, Olivet Boys Club in Reading, Pennsylvania.

“It was my dream job. I wanted to be able to positively impact children’s lives like others had done for me when I attended the Club in the 60’s.” Jeff looked forward to going to the Club every day since the first day he had signed up. He described the Club as his “home away from home.” It was a place where kids could hang out and have fun. There was no pressure to attend the Club during the week and on the weekends, but many of the kids including Jeff went every day they could.

Jeff described the three main goals of the Club back when he had attended in the 60’s. The Club focused on guiding children down the right paths to have a good life, stressed the importance of education, and encouraged the children to take part in activities at the club. Within the Club there were staff to help guide the children and help them open new doors to a new life after high school. The Club also had rooms setup for children to be able to do their homework in to help support the importance of education. Lastly the Club had many organized sports teams and activities for the children.

The Olivet Boys & Girls Club was a place where children could go when their parents were at work or a safe place to go and have fun with others. At this time in the 60’s the Club’s membership was all boys, but girls were allowed to go to the Club for certain programs designed for them. For Jeff, the best part of the Club was the varied athletic program which included baseball, basketball and bowling. Jeff and his friends enjoyed the team sports that the Club offered. The members of the Club on the athletic teams were able to compete in game against other Clubs in the area. Jeff loved playing basketball with his friends at the Club. His favorite part was traveling to the other Clubs in the area to compete against them.

The Club had also offered summer camps. Once he was older he was given the opportunity for his first job as a camp counselor which he did for three summers.

The Club back then was very different then it is today. Jeff was able to start as a Club member in the 60s, attended college and became a club director and in 1977 was appointed CEO, a position he held until his retirement on June 30, 2014. As President and CEO he helped the Club grow from a club serving 900 boys in 2 locations with a $68,000 budget to a club serving almost 4,000 boys and girls in 8 club sites and a 110 acre camp with a 3 million dollar budget. Mr. Palmer was involved as a club and staff member for 50 years of the clubs 115 year history. Although times have changed Jeff says the Club’s mission today “to enable all young
people, especially those who need us most, to reach their full potential as healthy, productive, caring, responsible citizens” is as relevant as it ever has been in the Club’s long history.
Jasmin’s Haven: An Oral History

by Jonathan Lorenzo

“My life without the Club would have been very different. I would have felt more lost.” -Jasmin Sanchez-Lopez

Jasmin Sanchez-Lopez was born in Puerto Rico and moved to the United States, with her parents and younger brother, when she was 10 years old. She initially moved to Reading and shortly after, her family relocated to the Wyomissing Area School District. Alongside this broad transition to a new life in the US, came with it the burden of several hardships.

Jasmin was the only ESL student when she moved into Wyomissing. In fact, there was not even an ESL program in the district at that time, which made it challenging for her to fit in and make friends. “I was always very shy… initially it was because I didn’t speak the language. But then, I didn’t really feel like I had too much in common to actually have a conversation with someone.” Jasmin’s parents were also very protective of her. They would not allow her to do many things or go many places, which further added to Jasmin’s struggle of adapting to her new life.

However, during the summer of ’96, when Jasmin was 14 years old, her mother – a case manager for SAM Inc. at the time – suggested that she try the Olivet Boys and Girls Club. Jasmin was unaware of what the Club entailed, but saw it as an opportunity to branch out and make friends. “I was always very shy… initially it was because I didn’t speak the language. But then, I didn’t really feel like I had too much in common to actually have a conversation with someone.” Jasmin’s parents were also very protective of her. They would not allow her to do many things or go many places, which further added to Jasmin’s struggle of adapting to her new life.

The Olivet Boys and Girls Club changed Jasmin’s life. Finally, she had an outlet that allowed her to express her true self. The Club gave her room to grow, provided her with the feeling of safety, and exposed her to others in situations similar to her own, which allowed her to begin forming relationships with her peers. It was a place where she could really “feel” herself. It was a “happy place” that provided her and the others with somewhere to “embrace the positive feeling…and bring out the good in everybody.”

Jasmin reminisced about the fun times she had at the Club. She was able to take part in several organized activities, such as playing pool, taking trips to the beach, going to sporting events, and enjoying summer camp. Through these activities, the Club offered Jasmin and her peers with experiences that they might not have otherwise gotten the opportunity to enjoy. Also, it kept them safe and occupied doing positive things. She even got to spend quality time with her little brother, who eventually began going to the Club with her. Overall, it provided her with experiences and memories that she is able to cherish to this day.
Jasmin continued to be an active member of the Club for three years – one of which, she was elected ‘Youth of the Year.’ During this time, she was involved in leading several events, such as manning activity booths, helping with the AIDS Quilt project, and even volunteered her musical abilities by playing guitar for other members of the Club. However, these three years did not mark the end of her experience with the Olivet Boys and Girls Club. At the age of 17, she actually became a member of the staff at the Oakbrook Club and was able to continue to offer her guidance and nurturing support to individuals in the Club.

After she graduated high school in ‘99, Jasmin began her studies as a Spanish major at Dickinson College, while still keeping her ties with the Oakbrook unit. She would return to participate as a member of the staff during her winter and summer breaks, which continued until she was 21 years old. When she graduated with her degree in 2003, she returned to work in the Reading area as an ESL teacher at Reading Intermediate High School. She is currently transitioning to her new position as Assistant Principal of 13th and Green Elementary School in the Reading School District.

Jasmin has not been back to the Oakbrook Club recently but still manages to remain connected. She understands that many of the students that she works with might be in very similar situations to what she had experienced growing up. Because of this and her faith in the positivity of the Club, she continues to refer her students to the Olivet Boys and Girls Club. “I know that it worked for me, so I’m hoping that it works for them too.”
Mike Schorn

by Weiss Shabon

Mike Schorn grew up in Reading, Pennsylvania and became highly effective as a teacher and basketball official. His story begins with Butch Sullivan, his uncle, who took him by the scruff of his neck on a Saturday when he was 10 years old to the Olivet 4 on Mulberry St. His uncle paid $5 for his dues and told the club director Danny Trout “can you take care of this kid and try to make a basketball player out of him? He needs some guidance and some structure.” During the time Mike was learning about basketball in 1953 and 1954, his uncle, Butch Sullivan, was a tremendous star athlete at Central Catholic; Butch was an outstanding athlete and Mike would attend his football games and track meets when he was 10 and 11 years old. He looked up to him. Butch Sullivan physically took Mike into the club to make the point that he will have the opportunity to succeed and also be able to experience competition. He wanted Mike to know the Olivet club could make him a better person. At the Olivet Club there was a basketball facility and at that time in 1954, basketball in Reading was very popular. Mike went to Catholic school and his friends, who he played basketball with, went to public school. They were older and showed him diversity since he was able to build relationships in the Catholic and Public schools.

When Mike first began at the Olivet club it was a new environment. Mike grew up with his grandparents in North 10th street in the 1100 block. Only two Olivets were around when he was growing up: Olivet 4, which he regularly attended, and Olivet 1, that was in the North West section of Reading. (Olivet 1 was a club where he spent a lot of time when he got older.) It was a growing process to join the Olivet club and there was a basketball court, which he loved, and pool tables and social amenities, which he didn’t get too involved with. Mike played basketball. During his time as a regular member at the Olivet club he spent a majority of his time there; if the place opened at 11:00 am he was there at 11:03 am and if it closed at 9:00 pm he was there until 9:00 pm. Mike would spend his entire free time playing hoop. Sometimes he never brought food because he never had any money as a kid and once in a great while the director would get him a bite to eat, bringing him a sandwich, hot dog, or cheeseburger. These are the kinds of memories that stand out and eventually helped him build relationships.

When he was in high school at the age of 16 Mike would go to Olivet 1 because Reading high school players lived in the North West section. The director of the club would give him a ride home even though it was a further distance. Danny Trout, Wally Briel, Dick Flannery, were people that were very instrumental and very good to him. Danny Trout is now an icon there. Many experiences and memories stood out to Mike but when it came to networking, developing of friendships was his first thought. Networking was important growing up since he went to Central and most kids who he met went to Reading High. There was a rivalry but as they grew older they became very good friends. An example of one of these friendships includes an all-time great player in the Reading history, Gary Walters. Mike took Gary to Princeton and helped him out and Gary became an all American at Princeton. He was just one example of the many good friends he had from the Olivet experience.
After the Olivet club Mike had a very successful high school and college career in basketball and baseball. If it wasn’t for the opportunity of playing at Olivet, he probably would have never received a scholarship. The club provided him the opportunity to progress his skills and learn how to really compete. After high school he went to Mt. Saint Mary’s University where he played four years of varsity basketball and baseball. With his network he was able to establish himself and get a degree, which then lead him to teach English in Reading school district in grades 9 and 10 for 32 years, and to referee NCAA basketball for 40 years.

Looking at the Olivet club from the 1950s until now, Mike sees that it has grown tremendously. Over the years kids have become very dependent upon the Olivets to provide nutrition, nourishment, guidance, and structure. Now there is swimming, a baseball park, and dancing at the Olivet clubs. Even now Mike is very close to the home Olivet in the Oakbrook housing project; he is over there once or twice a month with different organizations. According to Mike, the Olivet club is needed more now than it was back in the 1950s.
Manny Sostre Narrative

by Karina Lovera

“The Club was there for me more than anyone could really imagine. Looking back at it now, it was a safe haven!” said Manny Sostre.

Sostre was born and raised in Reading, Pennsylvania. He grew up in both Glenside and Oakbrook projects. He grew up in a single parent home, where his mother took on the role of both parents. Sostre admits it was a rough upbringing without his father present in the household. Sostre was very hardheaded and had a tough time in school and at home. He gave his mother and teachers a hard time. From a very young age Sostre didn’t like school, disliked being at home, and assumed he was stuck in that neighborhood.

In 1992, he began to attend the Olivet Boys’ and Girls’ Club, he was eleven years old. At that time there were some Whites and African-Americans, but the student population was predominately Hispanics. Sostre would go home after school to meet with his friends and they would all walk over to the Club. He enjoyed going to the Club every day because he knew it was a place he could have fun, let loose, and not worry about other issues in his life.

Sostre told me “as a child living in the projects, the Olivet Boys’ and Girls’ Club was all that was there.” The Club provided a lot for inner-city children and for most, it was a place that could guarantee them a meal. It was also a place where they could get extra help with their homework. The Club being located in the inner city of Reading, helped Sostre stay off the streets and get more involved in his community. He played sports at the Club and even participated in the different tournaments against the other Olivet Boys’ and Girls’ Club in Ping-Pong, foosball, basketball, flag football, and many other sports.

Around the age of fifteen, just like many other young adults, Sostre was going through many tough times. He decided to drop out of high school, but continued to attend the Club. His most meaningful memory was when he spoke to Barry Palmer for the first time. Mr. Palmer was one of the main people that worked in the administration office at the Club. He had an open door policy that allowed Sostre to walk in and start small conversations about school and life. Through these small conversations Mr. Palmer was able to advise Sostre and encourage him to get his GED. Sostre recalls Mr. Palmer helping him through the GED program and remembers Mr. Palmer telling him that he wanted to see him more involved in the Club and in his community. Sostre really admired Mr. Palmer and really took his advice into consideration. Mr. Palmer showed him the different student opportunities that the Club had to offer.

Sostre admitted that he was blessed to have met Mr. Palmer because he considered him to be like a father and it meant a lot to him since he didn’t have that at home. Sostre also mentioned many other influential people like Kevin Devera, the director of health and wellness, Jeff Palmer, the CEO that also received Sostre and all the children with open arms.
Sostre applied to work at the Club and was hired at age eighteen. For Sostre the transition from student to employee was not difficult. He had already experienced the process of going to the Club and it was an even better experience since he was able to see it from another perspective.

Sostre said, “that his life would have been very different if he hadn’t attended the Club.” Ultimately, attending the Club as a child had such a huge impact on him that it completely changed his life. If he hadn’t attended the Club he would have never met so many people that cared, who helped open his eyes, guided him towards the right path and helped him make better choices that would affect the rest of his life; which was to work with kids.

Now as the director, and the former youth member of the Oakbrook- Olivet Boys’ and Girls’ Club for over 20 years, Sostre considers his job to be very rewarding. He is pretty much in charge of everything that has to do with the Club. He oversees all aspects, even the financial side. He is responsible to plan and develop youth development programs. Most importantly serves as a liaison between alumni, executive club members, schools and parents. Although his position requires a lot of him, he truly loves it because he is able to give back to the community and return the kindness shown to him years before. Sostre is able to see the impact he’s had on the children who attend the Club and is able to help out those students who share similar backgrounds like him. He has also built strong relationships with the students that even when they leave they always return to thank “Mr. Manny” or “Coach Manny” for all that he has done. He hopes and dreams that “the Club continues to give as many resources to the kids and community of Reading for years to come.”

Sostre admitted that he owes a lot to the Club, and like every human being, he still has things he has to work on, but compared to how he was as a kid, “a knucklehead” he has come a long way and he is proud of what he has become!
Vaughn Spencer Narrative

by Kelsey Mosser

Vaughn Spencer was an active member of the Olivet Club for the years 1956-1959. Prior to joining the Club, he and his friends would play in the back alley between 8th and Cedar streets, which was cemented. The other alley was dirt between 9th and Cedar, but it was amusing to Vaughn and his friends to occasionally go because of the horse drawn carts parked there. If they played in the back alleys or the street, the neighbors would complain. Before Vaughn heard about the Club, he and his friends would play at the playground by the school on 10th and Green. Vaughn would also sneak over to the Outer Station at 6th Street Hollow to play, which was an elevated field that had a baseball field and track. A group of them would start out by going over the swinging bridge back toward the railroad tracks. Then they would walk down the steps to the Outer Station from there they walked along the wall to 6th Street and up the steps. However this area was far away from where he lived, and his parents did not find it safe for them to go over to that area without older kids.

Vaughn Spencer was first introduced to the Olivet Club by his classmates who told him about it; a lot of kids were unaware of the Club because they lived four or five blocks away. Vaughn then became a member of club four. There were only two clubs that existed then which were club number one on Clinton and Eisenbrown, which is still there, and his club number four on the 700 block of Mulberry. The Club was an inexpensive place to go and hang out with friends compared to The Y, where prices were much more expensive. When he entered the club on Mulberry Street, there were offices where he could sign up to join the Club. The next area he came in contact with was the basketball courts. Upstairs was the pool and ping pong tables and downstairs were the weights. There were arts and crafts to do as well, but many of the boys were not interested in doing those. A television was available for boys who wanted to watch a game or a show. Vaughn described it as, “a place to go and get involved with whatever you felt comfortable with. It was a place to play and be with your friends.” He preferred to go to the Olivet Club than the playground because there were more kids his age.

Vaughn first experienced playing organized basketball at the Club. Up until joining the Club, he and his friends mainly played football and baseball. Originally he would easily just jump to make the rebounds, but he eventually was taught how to play organized basketball, how to dribble, and pass. All the students who attended were from the Reading school district, so when he began playing basketball in school he knew many of his teammates. He played all the way from middle school through high school. In the summer at the Club, they would play baseball. Often there would be competitions with the Olivet Club number one in baseball and basketball.

One of many memorable experiences Vaughn had attending the Club was the tale of “the sheet man.” The kids from the Club would talk about a man who would run around with a sheet over his head. When they would leave the Club, they would walk in groups because other kids swore they saw this “sheet man.” Other kids would go out looking for him. He never personally saw “the sheet man.”
Vaughn believes the Club had an impact on a lot of kids growing up. He says, “The Club is a good attribute to the city; it provides kids a safe place to play.” He learned a lot of important lessons while being at the Club such as interacting with different people, accepting people for who they are, not where they are from, and not to judge a book by its cover. It provided him with a recreational place to play and meet new kids. Some of his ending remarks about the Club’s lessons were, “It did not matter the race or wealth of the kid as long as they were willing to be on a basketball or baseball team together; it did not matter where they were from.”
Mike Toledo Narrative

by Sis-Obed Torres

Mike Toledo became a member of the Olivet Boys and Girls Club when he was in the third grade. Now at forty-two years old, Mike still has the same love for the club he did when he was eight years old. Mike Toledo was born and raised in Reading Pennsylvania and was introduced to the Olivet Boys and Girls Club by some of his friends that lived in the same neighborhood as him. They told him there was this cool place where he could come and hang out after school, a place where he could play some basketball and participate in other activities. Mike never looked back once his friends convinced him to join the Olivet Club.

Back in Mike Toledo’s day, there wasn’t much of a choice for him; it was either the club or the streets. For Mike, the club was a much-needed venue and was crucial at such an impressionable time in his life. He was still young and the club provided him with a safe haven, a place where he could go after school and simply be himself. The club was also a place where his mother and father felt comfortable sending him off too because they felt it was a safe place where he could enjoy himself. The Olivet Club provided him structure and gave him the opportunities to figure himself out, it really helped him develop the foundation of the person he is today.

Mike Toledo has a lot of great memories of the club and one that sticks out the most, more than others is the “rule number four.” A lot of young kids may not have the best bedside manners, so to speak. So sometimes Mike would run out the mouth and say words he wasn’t supposed to say. He remembered like it was yesterday, the director of the club, Kermit Stern, a big guy that some of the kids were intimidated by, heard Mike say a swear word and screamed his name! Kermit Stern ran a tight ship at the club, so whenever any of the kids ran amuck, got loud, obnoxious, or maybe said words they shouldn’t say, he would discipline them. Mike remembers when he said something he shouldn’t have and Kermit told him to, “go read number four Toledo!” Mike then knew the rules on the wall like the back of his hand. He had number four memorized and still knows it now after over thirty years. Rule number four on the Olivet wall stated, “Vulgar or profane language, disrespect to staff, or refusal to obey members may result in being expelled.” Mike Toledo believes those rules and structure are what helped him through all these years and are still with him today. Mike truly loved the foundation and mentorship he received at the club. He believed in it so much that both his kids participated in the club while growing up, following in their father’s footsteps.

Toledo expressed that a lot of his neighborhood friends who chose not to participate in the club are either in jail, deceased, or have lost contact with him. The peers he was a member with in the club are now doing great things. Mike believes the club has helped keep many off the streets and out of trouble. He has experienced this first hand when seeing the contrast between his friends who were in the club and those who were not.

Today the club is still a big part of Mike Toledo’s life. Mike admits he still carries around his Olivet membership card. It’s a way for Mike to stay grounded and to remind himself who he is and where has come from. Having the card also allows him to show other people who he is and what he’s always been about.
Right after Mike graduated from college in 1994, he came right back to the Olivet Club and got an alumni card the first chance he got.

Now Mike Toledo is the director of the Hispanic Center in Reading, Pa. He helps to improve the quality of life for those who live in the area. This club runs different programs that revolve around community to help this area in need. Some of those initiatives include, a higher education program, a senior center, information and referral, and other programs of that nature.

In the end, if it wasn’t for the Olivet Boys and Girls Club, Mike Toledo would be uncertain of where he would be today. Some people think of the club as a place to just play basketball or shoot pool but for people like Mike Toledo, it’s much more than that. The club is a place where kids can be safe from the streets, a place where they can learn to be leaders, and most importantly, a place where kids can receive love and support. As a young Latino male, being able to participate in these programs helped Mike to establish a good self-esteem, confidence in speaking in front of people, and being able to articulate in order to convey good messages. Mike doesn’t know if he would have been able to do that without the club’s support. A foundation had to start somewhere for Mike and for him, that foundation was the Olivet Boys and Girls Club.
John Weidenhammer Narrative

by Ashley Weber

John Weidenhammer lived a traditional childhood and enjoyed hanging out at the Olivet Boys and Girls Club with his two older brothers and his friend. He was born in 1949 in Reading, PA and was involved in the club from 1955 through about 1964. He believes that he grew up in a middle class family. His father worked at Dana Corporation for 34 years until he retired; his mother was a homemaker until he and his brothers were older and then she worked in retail. He grew up on West Douglass Street in Reading which was about six blocks away from the Olivet Boys and Girls Club, so when he was probably about ten he believes that was when he was able to start walking to the club on his own whenever he wanted to. Before that he had to rely on his brothers to take him so his time there was quite sporadic. Besides Olivet, John also valued spending time with his family. John’s oldest brother was married at 19 and had a baby girl. John’s oldest brother and his wife and their new baby lived right across the street from their parents’ house. John was nine years old when he had his first “niece” which he says is more like a little sister to him because his mother was always watching her which he said was always fun.

John went to elementary school at Charles Foose about a block away from his home on West Douglass Street, which today is used as an apartment building. He then went on to junior high from seventh to tenth grade at Northwest Middle School and then from there he started high school at Reading High in eleventh grade. Some students from other Reading middle schools started at Reading High in tenth grade so it was weird to blend with students that have already been there for a year. However, it was easy for John because he knew a lot of the kids at the high school already from playing baseball, basketball, and football. John always did very well in school. A neat program that he was put in to in seventh grade was called the school mathematics study group or SMSG. During this program they did not have any textbooks; the whole course was based on mimeograph sheets that they handed out and it focused on understanding the concepts rather than understanding actual problem solving. He was involved with SMSG all the way through twelfth grade and then he finished up math with calculus. SMSG and calculus prepared John well for college at Lehigh University. He graduated from Lehigh University in 1971 with a degree in Industrial Engineering.

John has fond memories of Olivet. He said that it was really the only place to go swimming during the summer at the time, other than swimming in the Schuylkill River which was dirty and dangerous. The club was pretty much only boys when he was involved except maybe two days a week when the pool would let the entire neighborhood come whether they were members or not. Those days were fun because girls and their families and just everyone would be there. They also had a bowling alley at the Olivet’s that had two lanes that unlike today did not have automatic pin spotters; back then they had a peddle that you would step on and the pins would come up out of the alley. You always had to have a “pin boy” while bowling who would pick up the bowling balls that were sent down the alley and put them in the shoot to send them back to the bowlers. Being a pin boy was a job that John had when the men would come in at night to bowl; he said he probably got a dollar each time he was a pin boy for the night. Table pool, table tennis, and ping pong were also games that John was fascinated with at Olivet. He was extremely involved with basketball at the
clue; he said that he was not necessarily a really great player but he just loved to play. John was on the traveling basketball team for Olivet that was called the Interstate Team. They traveled to Delaware and New Jersey and other places to play other boys club teams. This was cool for John to experience because he was never really anywhere outside of the city of Reading. When John was an older teenager he was a basketball referee for the little kids at the Olivet Boys and Girls Club. He then coached the little kids, around the ages of five, six, seven, and eight. His most moving experience during his time at the Olivet’s was winning the Interstate Championships because there were so many good players and good teams.

According to John, there were some, “very interesting characters” at Olivet. Spike Moyer was the manager of the club and then after Spike a guy by the name of Jeff was the new manager of the club. Spike lived in Glennside and his son was a contemporary of John’s in high school, so John knew him not only as a guy that ran the club but he also knew him through his son. Danny Trout was another interesting guy that was the assistant manager. He remembers Danny could make a basketball shot a lot where he would stand with his back against the wall and throw the ball above his head and bounce it off of the wall and make a basket. There was also a professional wrestler by the name of Marvin Miller who let the kids try to choke him and his neck was so strong that the kids could never choke him no matter how hard they tried. Marvin also had a rock hard stomach so he would let the kids punch him in the stomach as hard as they could and they could never hurt him.

From a career standpoint, John worked for Carpenter in Reading in the information systems from 1971-1974. He then worked for Ernst & Ernst, which is now called Ernst & Young from 1974-1978 as a consultant. John then started his own business right in Wyomissing in 1978 called Weidenhammer that is an information technology business. His business has grown globally and they have about 200 employees in their company now. They have offices in Pennsylvania, Arizona, Michigan, and Colorado. They have clients all over the U.S in 29 states. They also have clients in Canada, South America, Europe, and China.

In conclusion, the Olivet Boys and Girls Club had a formative impact on John’s life. What was most significant to him about being involved with the club was the opportunity to explore beyond his boundaries and to go outside of his comfort zone. John also shared that dealing with all different people and the older kids toughened him up. Sports were very competitive in the club and he enjoyed being involved in sports all of the time. John shared that the Olivet Club was mostly just entertainment for John throughout his childhood and teenage years, and if it was focused towards academics he was not aware. However, some skills that John did take away from the club were responsibility and leadership skills. He also learned that what goes around comes around and that giving back to the community is important. His company, Weidenhammer, also runs a fundraiser every year on the Friday before the Superbowl, which is a tailgate chili cook-off to raise money for the Olivet Boys and Girls Club. This is John’s way of giving back to the club.