

Worried About America? Visit a Boys & Girls Club

By [Jonathan Alter](#) Sep 22, 2011 5:06 PM PT

Bloomberg Opinion

The political world is so toxic that I needed some relief, so I tuned into a reality show more real than anything on television. I wasn't disappointed. The stories I heard were at once harrowing and inspirational. And they were deeply connected to the future of the country.

This week, I served as one of five judges in the [Boys & Girls Clubs of America](#) National Youth of the Year competition. This is like the Miss America pageant, except that instead of judging contestants by how they look in a ball gown, we were assessing things like "Moral Character," "Public Speaking" and "Obstacles Overcome."

Talk about a man-bites-dog story: The adults in the room -- from a senior White House official to an executive with [Major League Baseball](#) -- stood in awe of 17- and 18-year-olds.

In a better world, the Youth of the Year competition would be on television; there was plenty of suspense over who the winner would be. Of course, stories of young people doing well and serving their communities wouldn't make for a juicy series. Or would it? "The Situation" in these kids' lives is a lot more compelling than getting a tan and going to the gym.

4.1 Million Kids

With little notice, the 4,000 Boys & Girls Clubs in impoverished areas of all 50 states have become a vital part of the social safety net. They serve about 4.1 million kids under 18. That's more than a quarter of the population of so-called at-risk young people, the ones who would end up in jail, on drugs or mired in deep poverty without early intervention.

Once they realize it's not uncool to show up, boys, in particular, routinely say that the club saved their lives. In most poor rural and urban areas nowadays, the only social anchors are

the church, the school and the Boys & Girls Club. It's hard to find an Indian reservation or housing project that doesn't have one.

This year's finalists each beat hundreds of others with a daunting combination of essays and recommendations that only hinted at how impressive they are in person. All the judges were blown away by our one-on-one interviews, and again when the students delivered five-minute memorized speeches.

Here's my reality show cast, each of whom has more maturity than the entire [U.S. Congress](#) combined.

Five Stories

Nick was from [Boston](#). One day, when he was 8 and had already been beaten by his mother's boyfriend, he waited at school for several hours for his mom to pick him up. She never showed. He was shunted between foster homes before taking his possessions in two garbage bags and moving to Pittsburgh, where he lived with an aunt and her partner. Now he's completed more than 2,000 hours of volunteer service at the club, feeding hungry kids and refereeing sports.

Akheem says his family life is like "nothing on TV." After his brother was killed in a drug deal in [Orlando, Florida](#), his family spiraled down. At 16, he became the primary caregiver for eight younger siblings so that his grandmother could work. After becoming the first in his family to graduate from high school, he's excelling in college and has founded a network of Brother- to-Brother Clubs to get boys off the streets. "I ask them two questions: Is this the life you want to live? And if not, what can I do to help you get someplace better?"

Tamika's mother is a drug addict, and Tamika has never met her father. After she got some local publicity in East Chicago, [Indiana](#), for advancing in the competition, her father got in touch and she told him: "I forgive you." She says that of the 25 or so girls she knows best, only three or four others managed to avoid teen pregnancy. Most told her they couldn't afford \$500 for an abortion and liked the control of having a baby. She started a program to bring more parents and grandparents (many still in their 30s) into her club.

Deshawn, the son of a drug dealer, lived in a housing project in [Little Rock, Arkansas](#), where they had to run extension cords from apartment to apartment because there was so little power. When he first showed up at the club, he says, “I hated it with a passion. It was too strict.” But it soon became what he calls “my secret hiding place, my home away from home.” Now he’s a freshman at Morehouse College, focusing on science, and determined to run a company or cure a disease.

Darnisha raised two sisters amid drug abuse in Boise, [Idaho](#). As she watched her neighborhood collapse under crystal meth, the scourge of many rural areas, she developed her own problems. “I had fallen into a black hole,” she says. When she was 16, her father’s cancer was diagnosed. She took care of him. Then, after he died, she made all the funeral arrangements and handled his possessions. Like the others, she credits the club with saving her.

The Future Workforce

Our deliberations were intense. We finally chose Nick -- [Nicholas S. Foley](#) -- who at 17 is the youngest of the group, but it could have been any of them. Each finalist was everything we want our kids to be. All have already escaped their circumstances and will go on to great success.

The question is how many more can do so. Roxanne Spillet, the longtime president and chief executive officer of Boys & Girls Clubs, stepped down recently after more than doubling the number of clubs and presiding over \$1.5 billion in revenue (including more than \$50 million a year from the federal government). She told me at lunch that many of the local benefactors now understand that this cause is about more than saving the lives of these kids.

“This is also about the rest of us,” she says. “It’s about our self-interest and the workforce of the future.”

For a few years now, venture capitalists and bankers worried about this future workforce have invested in education- reform ideas like charter schools. Programs like the Boys & Girls Clubs are seen as worthy if stodgy charities. They need to be seen as important and

cutting-edge investments in the future. The Wall Street guy who figures out how to fund a fun, Web-based remediation program for Boys & Girls Clubs will change the world.

The good news, for businesses and for poor communities, is that Boys & Girls Clubs and other proven models are quietly helping more kids like Nick, Akheem, Tamika, Deshawn and Darnisha -- a generation of young people with enormous untapped potential.

When you do something to help them, you find that reality can be restorative.

([Jonathan Alter](#) is a Bloomberg View columnist and the author of “The Promise: President Obama, Year One.” The opinions expressed are his own.)



About Jonathan Alter:

Jonathan Alter was a senior editor, media critic and columnist for Newsweek, where he worked for 28 years and covered five administrations and seven presidential campaigns.

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