



Photos provided by the Boys and Girls Club

# Answering a Call to Serve

## Boys & Girls Clubs and the Armed Forces: A Second Decade of Partnership

By Katy Griggs

**T**hese are the challenges and stresses that U.S. military children face every day. Some may appear to be brave and strong for their families, but nonetheless they still need all the support they can get.

That's why Boys & Girls Clubs of America has made expanding its partnership with each branch of the U.S. armed forces a priority. Over the course of the last decade, every Youth Center located on a U.S. military base – 432 in 15 countries – became affiliated with BGCA, giving some 500,000 young people the same access to tested programs, training, grants and resources enjoyed by traditional Club members. In fact, our partnership with the armed forces has grown so much that military Youth Centers now account for some 10 percent of our affiliates.

"We applaud BGCA's innovative outreach efforts to military families," says Deputy Under Secretary of Defense Leslye A. Arsht. "By doing so, they help us support our youth and families wherever they may live."

### Times are Changing – So are Needs

As a result of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, military reservists and guardsmen have been mobilized in unprecedented numbers. Such high deployment leads to a greater demand for more programs developed just for military families. More than ever, children of these families need support and meaningful activities during non-school hours.

"When one considers the stresses placed upon our military

**Imagine that, while growing up, you moved five times in four years, often on short notice. You had to constantly make new friends – and you were always worried about your mother or father being sent far away on a dangerous job.**

youth today, it's important to increase standardization among military installations across the globe," says Karen Morgan of the Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense. "This generation of military children is facing extraordinary challenges that our community has not had to deal with since the early '70s."

BGCA-affiliated military Youth Centers are ready to assist young people in coping with such anxiety and stress. "We are more committed than ever to help military children and families who need us," says Tim Richardson, BGCA's vice president of Military Services.

### Expanded Support

Just as the number of youth served on military installations has grown, so has programming. In the last five years alone, more than \$10 million in pass-through grants, scholarships, equipment,

toys, software and other resources from BGCA have been awarded to military Clubs. BGCA is also developing a new service model for military sites, to be rolled out at 13 regional cluster trainings in areas that have the highest populations of families in the armed forces.

Other ways that BGCA has expanded services to military youth include:

- **Addressing the Dropout Crisis.** Through a partnership with the National Guard, BGCA and local Clubs lend their support and training expertise to the National Guard Youth Challenge, a residential mentoring and General Education Development (GED) acquisition program for high school dropouts and those severely behind in their studies. Offered at no cost to participants, the six-month program is provided in 30 states and Puerto Rico, and serves some 12,000 youth annually.
- **Family Support.** BGCA has expanded its family support programming to include military Clubs, through the support of Kimberly-Clark and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Family PLUS (Parents Leading, Uniting, Serving), sponsored by Kimberly-Clark, builds capacity for Clubs to find new ways to bring families together for the positive development of youth. For example, at the Naval Air Station Oceana in Virginia, a 2008 Family PLUS grant recipient, a hot breakfast and dinner are served once a month so that families can enjoy a meal together in a relaxed environment. To make family support resources more widely available, BGCA has launched a public website (<http://familyplus.bgca.org>) and a resource guide to be distributed to all Clubs.

- **Coast Guard Partnership.** Eight Coast Guard bases and air stations large enough to have Youth Center facilities now benefit from BGCA's national programs, professional development training, grants and services. Since the partnership's inception, more than 11,000 Coast Guard kids from those sites have become Boys & Girls Club members.

### Beyond Base Gates

National Guard, reservist and nearly 70 percent of active duty families live in civilian communities, many too far away to access daily on-installation youth services. To reach children in these circumstances and give them the same youth programs and services as those living on base, all major military branches and BGCA developed MISSION: Youth Outreach. Through this innovative partnership, off-installation military children have a year of membership underwritten at their nearest traditional Boys & Girls Club. More than 5,000 military youth have benefitted from MISSION: Youth Outreach.

The U.S. Army has expanded its partnerships with local Clubs near several large, high-density installations. Two initiatives, Operation Military Kids (a joint partnership with all branches of the military) and Army School Age Programs in Your Neighborhood (ASPYN), give targeted Clubs special staff training on how to support Army families and children. For example, the Clements Boys & Girls Club near Fort Hood, Texas, serves nearly 250 Army youth daily, thanks to support from ASPYN.

### Overseas Support

In addition to the challenges related to high deployment, military youth stationed overseas are more isolated from their adjacent communities by language and cultural barriers. Recent BGCA teen and parent focus groups on high deployment bases revealed that military youth greatly need special skills camps and recreational events, especially during the summer and on holidays. Here are two ways BGCA has responded:

- **As the official charity for Major League Baseball,** BGCA can bring America's favorite pastime to overseas Clubs. For the past four years, MLB's Envoy coaching program has sent professional baseball coaches abroad to conduct free baseball clinics at military Youth Centers. Last summer, more than 2,200 military youth and teens from 15 European military bases and nine installations in Asia, Alaska and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, participated.
- **BGCA's longstanding relationship with the U.S. Olympic Committee** has made it possible for Olympic athletes to tour military Youth Centers in Europe and Asia this summer. The athletes will conduct hands-on sport demonstrations, teach sportsmanship and explain Olympic values.

After its first decade, BGCA's partnership with the armed forces is stronger than ever. "We appreciate BGCA's willingness to provide nationwide attention to deployment support for our military youth and their families," says Arsht. "We look forward to continuing collaborative efforts that greatly benefit our youth and the military community as a whole." 

*Katy Griggs is an editorial coordinator for BGCA.*

