

Greater Lowell Boys & Girls Club Youth of the Year sees hard work pay off

By Robert Mills, rmills@lowellsun.com

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Jeremy Encarnacion, the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell's Youth of the Year, ponders his next move in a chessmatch at the club on Friday. SUN / JOHN LOVE

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LOWELL -- Jeremy Encarnacion is just 14 years old, but he already has his sights set on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a career as a mechanical engineer.

When he's not playing basketball, pool, or hanging out with friends, that is.

Encarnacion, who has been going to the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell since he was in the fourth grade, was named the club's Youth of the Year on Wednesday.

A student at Greater Lowell Technical High School, the Lowell teen said he goes to the club to see friends and play basketball -- he's a small forward -- but that he's also learned a lot and gained confidence from the club's educational programs.



Jeremy Encarnacion of Lowell, the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell's Youth of the Year, works with younger members at the club on Friday. "Always prepare for your future," he said when asked what he's learned from club programs. SUN / JOHN LOVE

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Encarnacion is part of the club's sports leagues, the Torch and Keystone leadership clubs, a college and career exploration program called diplomas2-Degrees, the Sky program, which

helps participants set goals, and a community internship program. He lives in Lowell with his mother Carmen Arias and his stepdad Claudio Arias.

Encarnacion said programs like diplomas2Degrees have made the idea of higher education a lot less intimidating since he now knows what schools and resources are out there.

"The club showed me how to be prepared when you are trying to get a job -- resumes, interview questions, and how to dress up nice and be presentable. Now I have a job at Market Basket," Encarnacion said.

"I could easily be anywhere else, but here I'm learning and getting a step ahead on life." Being named Youth of the Year also earned him a \$1,000 scholarship that will be waiting when he heads to college.

"Always prepare for your future," Encarnacion said when asked what he's learned from the club's programs. "You always have help around you if you ever need it."

Joe Hungler, the club's executive director, said Encarnacion often helps keep groups focused when they get distracted, works hard, and always shows compassion toward other youths.



Jeremy Encarnacion, right, plays chopsticks on the piano with youth leader Nicholas Figueroa at the club on Friday afternoon. SUN/ JOHN LOVE

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"Jeremy is known around the club for his leadership and maturity," Hungler said. "He often reaches out to staff to see what opportunities to volunteer or improve himself are coming up, rather than waiting for someone to seek him out."

Encarnacion beat out fellow 14-year-old Anthony Villa, another Greater Lowell Tech freshman, for the honor, but judges praised both young men and said the choice was tough.

"I think they're both great so it was a really tough decision," said one of the judges, Nick Myers, a volunteer at the club who works for Toyota Financial Services. "They both have really good writing and speaking skills. They're both confident and engaged in a lot of activities here."

Myers said judges looked for confidence, intelligence, good writing and speaking skills and an overall persona that they felt would represent the club well.

City Councilor Dan Rourke, Cheryl Popp of Lowell Five, Myers, and Shelly Donovan of Mount Auburn Hospital were the other judges.

"I went to the Boys and Girls Club as a kid, and both Anthony and Jeremy were outstanding," Rourke said. "You could tell they both have very bright futures."

Villa, who lives in Lowell with his parents Sokhom Chun and Henry Villa, said he too wants to become an engineer someday, though he is more focused on going into computer-assisted design or painting and design.

Hungler said the Youth of the Year competition has been a tradition since 1961, and seeks youths who embody values like leadership, service, academic excellence and healthy lifestyles.

"They exemplify the critical impact of the Boys & Girls Club on the lives of young people," Hungler said.

Encarnacion will now go on to compete to be the Massachusetts Youth of the Year at an event in May, and if successful there will enter nationwide competition.

"I learned a lot at the Boys & Girls Club about commitment, leadership and compassion," Encarnacion said. "The staff showed me that I can be someone despite my circumstances and obstacles. They taught me that in order to get things done, I have to work for it."

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