

Be Strong After School Club: "It's Just a Loving Program"

By Kate McClare

At a time when young people face so many negative influences just as they're trying to figure out who they are and where they belong, the Be Strong After School Club offers a safe, positive environment. Funded predominantly by The Children's Trust, this unique enrichment program guides middle school students' emotional, mental, physical, spiritual, and social development. It helps them build social skills and develop both academically and creatively through the arts.

Joel Rodriguez was just looking for friends and fun when he joined the After School Club as a student at Richmond Heights Middle School in Miami. He found those things and more - so much more, he became a volunteer with the program.

Now 14, he attends Coral Reef High School in Miami. He loves playing basketball and football, spending time with his family and helping the students and teachers at the After School Club.

"I like to help out, and it also makes me feel good that other friends that were part of the program are also volunteering to help younger kids. Thanks to the program, I can be a role model. They can see why this program is very lovable and how people come back to help other people to be better."

Joel first heard about the program from a friend.

"He told me how amazing the program is, and I wanted to try it out. So I came in one day, and they met me with open arms. I fell in love with the program."

One of his favorite memories is the club activity in which everyone built gingerbread houses. This simple event brought everyone together to explore their creativity in a fun way. "We got to know other people and see whose gingerbread house was the best. We all had a great time, and we all had to compete but in a fun way, and we got to build and eat a gingerbread house. It was a lot of fun."



(L-R) Joel Rodriguez and Vasti Thomas.

The Be Strong After School Club has also taught him about the importance of seeing beyond the moment.

"Patience is always the key, and one simple little emotion can ruin you forever. It doesn't last just a moment."

A student-athlete at Coral Reef, Joel hopes to be a professional basketball player. He believes Be Strong can help him make that dream come true.

"They have been supportive. The teachers come to my games. They always encourage us to follow our dreams, to never give up, don't quit and that we always have an open door to come back."

His parents, too, are happy with his participation. "They always support me. They always say how proud they are - they keep pushing me."

He encourages every middle schooler to join the club and find the love and support that he did.

"It's just a loving program. They have a lot of great things they teach, and they create great friendships. It is a peaceful place."

Be Strong After School Club

- Offered on-site at Richmond Heights Middle School and Palm Glades Preparatory Academy with 80 students, served by 12 staff and contracted instructors, along with four high school student mentors.
- Provides academic assistance, enrichment programs (culinary, photography and dance classes), financial literacy classes, Heart Skills workshop, field trips and more.
- For more information, call 305-969-7829, ext. 109.