

# **Boys and Girls Club A First in Canada**

*by Jane Barry*

*The Greater Saint John Community Foundation*

The Saint John Boys and Girls Club, as the telephone greeting says, is "a good place to be" for 2,400 Saint John area children, from preschoolers to teens. The largest youth-serving agency in our community is part of a group of organizations dedicated to the improvement of our young people around the world. There is a proud heritage of service to young Canadians which originated in Saint John. In 1900, a group of concerned local citizens set up a "public playground movement" to provide a safe place to play for children from disadvantaged circumstances, with no place to go after school but the streets. The "Every Day Club", originally established as a winter location for the Playground Association, later became known as the East End Boys' Club, later becoming the first "Boys Club" in Canada. It wasn't long before the movement became "Boys and Girls" Clubs, having spread across Canada to help every young person receive the opportunity to develop their fullest potential.

Boys and Girls Clubs in Canada have provided safe, caring environments and stimulating programs enabling about 3 million young Canadians to play, learn and develop skills to help them achieve their full potential as contributing adults, citizens and leaders by offering vital educational, recreational and skills development programs and services. Clubs establish programs that reach out to young people, particularly those living in disadvantaged areas. The ability of clubs to mobilize resources in response to the individual needs of the children in each community is one of the organization's key strengths, whether it be in city centres, remote rural communities, First Nations reserves or in such non-traditional settings as shopping malls, schools, homeless shelters, group homes and on the streets.

Debbie Cooper has been at the Boys and Girls Club almost her entire life, both as a child, youth leader and now, Executive Director for over two decades. Her exceptional dedication to them is evident as children and staff respond with affection and respect. When asked about what would be a top priority for the Club at the moment she states that the Youth Program, which serves youth from 5-15 during the school year evenings is in urgent need of sponsors and volunteers. She is delighted with the recent announcement of RBC's support for their afterschool program, bringing much needed resources to the dozens who come by each school afternoon. The daycare is also a busy spot, as is the lunch program, literally buzzing with eager, hungry children who politely line up for a nutritious meal each school day.

The range of services provided is mind-boggling: from supervised computer access, Friday night dance parties, fitness workouts to library, gym, crafts, emergency clothing, canteen, summer programs, Christmas parties and gifts from Santa, the club is a beehive of organized activities.

In this economy, it is particularly challenging to find the necessary resources to pay the power bills, let alone the materials and equipment costs and maintenance for such a huge operation. But Debbie Cooper takes it in stride with the faith that support will be there when needed, whether it be from the 188 volunteers, United Way or Rotary Club, longtime backers, the Mother's Auxiliary, JD Irving, which purchased state-of-the-art kitchen equipment, Giant Tiger, the library sponsor, the Bill Gates Foundation, which funded new information technology equipment or the Greater Saint John Community Foundation, which just revealed it will fund a program to track, analyze and manage the hundreds of youth registered at the Club and the outcomes of the programs they attend.

The Club also runs the Youth Choices program in the South End to help, address the significant barriers facing at-risk youth and their families. Last year, they offered 149 older teens individual counseling, educational and employment skills development, advocating and supporting long term goal efforts, crisis intervention, providing transportation to employment, education or health related appointments, consultation with and referrals to outside agencies. They also operate the youth programs at the South End Centre on Wentworth St. for the City of Saint John. There is no question that the Club is living up to their Mission of providing a safe, supportive place where children and youth can experience new opportunities, overcome barriers, build positive relationships and develop confidence and skills for life.



Photo: Debbie Cooper, right, executive director of the Saint John Boys and Girls Club, and Catherine Robichaud, left, a Saint John High student, part-time club staff member and president of the Key Club, work in an after-school homework program with Cody Cook, 11, and his brother, Riley, 10. (Photo by K  t   Braydon, /Telegraph Journal)



*Community Profile is a weekly column highlighting community causes and work done by non-profit organizations in the Greater Saint John area. It is contributed by Jane Barry, executive director of The Greater Saint John Community Foundation. Contact the foundation at 506-672-8880. To view other Community Profiles go to [www.saint-john-foundation.nb.ca](http://www.saint-john-foundation.nb.ca)*