

Unsung Heroes

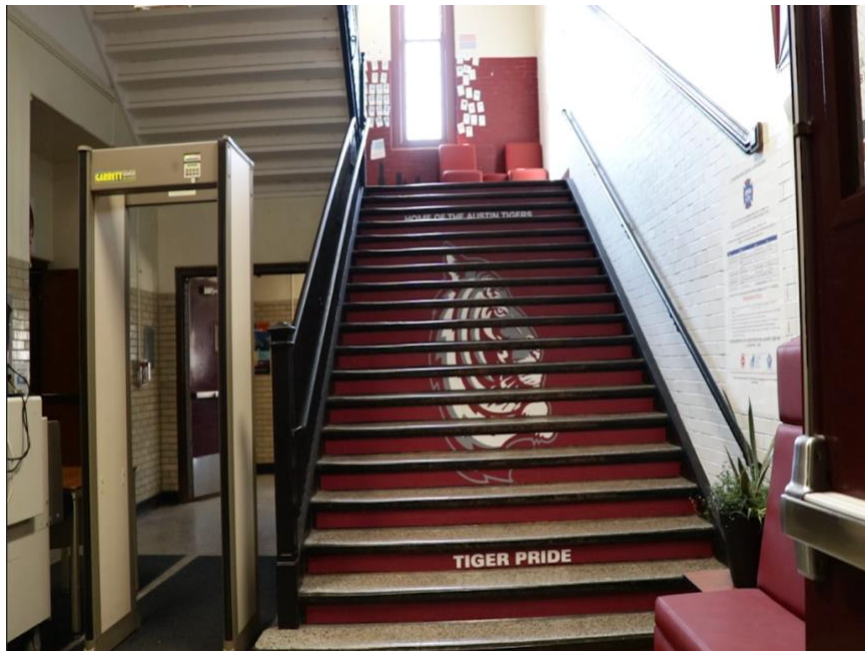
“Slowly, but surely,” the Boys & Girls Club strives to make a difference on Chicago’s West Side

It’s a calm Friday morning. Collecting his thoughts to the ever-present sound of birds chirping over stagnant cars in the background, Austin Club Manager, Andres Lozano, sits in his office — a literal makeshift “hole in the wall” he created for himself in the back of an empty classroom at Austin College & Career Academy High School.

Sorting through a random assortment of papers on his desk, he can’t stop thinking about the magnificent celebration that took place the night before at Navy Pier. As he observed from afar, white and blue colored confetti rained down from the 80 ft. domed ceiling of the Aon Grand Ballroom, showering the recently announced 2024 Youth of the Year recipient in recognition like the Most Valuable Player from the winning team in the NBA Finals.

For the Boys & Girls Club, the Youth of the Year award is the club’s highest honor. One where Davion (a disadvantaged youth, representing the Austin Club), narrowly lost in votes to Ebonnye, Alcott’s shining star. “Unfortunately, my kid didn’t get picked because he swore in the interview twice,” said Lozano, reflecting on Thursday’s event. “Even though he didn’t win, [his nomination] was a huge accomplishment [for our program].”

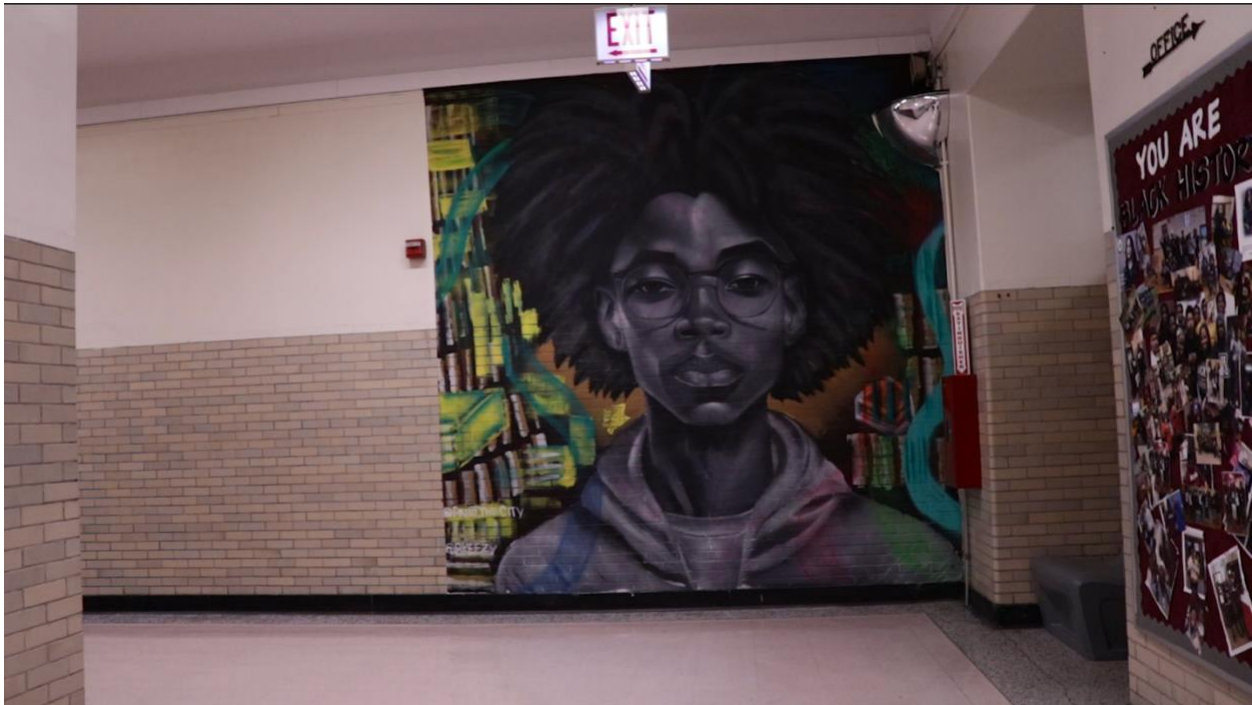
As he walked through the empty halls, waiting for hungry students to fight through metal detectors like sand trying to escape an hourglass, for a brief moment, he felt an overwhelming sense of pride. Having served as Club Manager at the school-based club in Austin for over three years now, he remembers a time when people told him to “stay away.” In retrospect, he’s glad he didn’t listen.



“When I first took this job, my family told me ‘Maybe you should pick a different place,’” said Lozano, explaining the many dangers of living and working on Chicago’s West Side. “And believe me, if I told you some of the stories that have happened to me in the three years I’ve been here, you’d ask me, ‘Why have you stayed?’”
Photo by: Jalen Taylor
(MEDILL)

Heading back to his office, his shoes squeak beneath him as he travels down the school's overly polished floors (a stark distinction from the litter filled streets outside, where bullets pierce through the sky like clockwork).

Taking a moment to catch his breath, he's overwhelmed by the strong scent of generic cleaning solution exuding from large, crimson lockers. Florescent light from the bulbs overhead illuminates masterfully crafted works of art created by incredibly ambitious students (many of whom he serves as a mentor).



A colorful mural depicting “Black Excellence,” created entirely by students at the Austin Boys & Girls Club.
Photo by: Jalen Taylor (MEDILL)

As he returns to his desk, thoroughly excited to start his day after being complimented by one of his favorite students, he reminds himself of a simple concept so many people seem to forget:

With proper guidance, good kids can come from bad neighborhoods.

The Motivation

Three years ago, Andres Lozano lived an entirely different life. An aspiring health care professional studying epidemiology at the University of Michigan, his biggest concerns were playing soccer, waiting tables and trying to stay awake during lethargy-inducing Zoom classes.

While he was incredibly successful in his endeavors, at a certain point, he couldn't help but feel the slightest bit unfulfilled. Desperately searching for meaning in a post-pandemic world, his life changed forever when his long-time soccer coach approached him about a potential job opportunity at the Boys & Girls Club (Lozano is originally from [Elgin](#), a peaceful city ~38 miles northwest of downtown Chicago).

Deciding to embark on an entirely new journey, he left school and planted seeds in Austin — a [notoriously](#) bad neighborhood on Chicago’s West Side, plagued by drugs, violence and criminal activity.



“This is something where it doesn’t feel like a job for me anymore, it’s more like a hobby,” Lozano said. “I finally feel like I’m making a difference.” Photo by: Jalen Taylor (MEDILL)

As a new staff member, Andres made the mistake of parking on the street rather than the school’s parking lot. As he approached his vehicle after a long day at work, he noticed an unidentified group of kids were trying to steal his catalytic converter. When they saw him coming, they gave up and robbed him for his wallet instead.

For the entire hour and a half ride back home, that’s all he could think about. **If he didn’t know before, he certainly knew now what it meant to live, and work, in an underprivileged community.**

“I kept it a secret from the organization because I didn’t want them to say, ‘You know what, maybe this isn’t the right place for you,’ said Lozano, explaining the reasoning behind his head-scratching decision. “I come from a country where violence is normal. Has it ever stopped me from doing my job? No, not at all. As a matter of fact, it probably encourages me to do more for these kids to try and straighten them out.”

And do more he has. Since Lozano’s three years at the club, he’s achieved outstanding success in the Austin area, creating lasting impact, as exemplified by Davion’s recent 2024 Youth of the Year nomination. During his introductory interview, Davion said, **“As I got older, [I realized] I had to change, and the club helped me do that because the people that were mentoring me,**

motivated me.” Although he wasn’t directly mentioned by name, everyone knows he was talking about Andres.



According to Lozano, Austin College & Career Academy is one of Chicago’s four oldest schools (originally founded in 1876). To promote safety, the doors of the school are always locked. To gain entrance, students (and visitors) must buzz in through a surveillance system and pass through a series of metal detectors. Photo courtesy of ACCA.

The School (and the club’s affiliation)

Located at 231 N. Pine Ave, Austin College & Career Academy is 1 of 148 High Schools in the Chicago Public Schools District. With 99.1% minority enrollment (92.5% black), **the “monumental” school housing the Austin Boys & Girls Club struggles**, significantly trailing behind the rest of the city in academic performance (According to [U.S. News & World Report](#), Austin College & Career Academy has an abysmal 54% graduation rate).

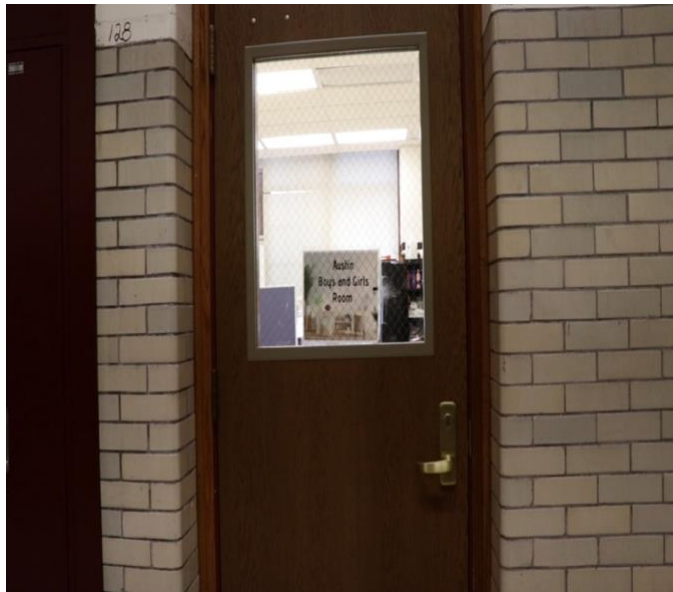
“Can you imagine how difficult it is to do well in school if you’re more concerned with mere survival?” said Mark Schmeltzer, Director of Communications at Mercy Home for Boys & Girls, explaining the impact of violence on the community. “We have kids who’ve witnessed friends die, they’ve had loss, they’ve seen people get killed. As you can imagine, that makes them feel less safe, which affects their performance in school.”



West Side children (and staff) have a lot of their plate, which make’s Davion’s recent success, and Lozano’s contributions, that much more impressive (Davion was one of seven youth members selected out of a pool of thousands of candidates, recognized for his **outstanding academic performance**, leadership and service in an area where every day survival is viewed as an accomplishment). Photo courtesy of Boys & Girls Clubs of Chicago.

Since the beginning of the year, Austin College & Career Academy has lost a total of three kids to violence (two of which were members of the school's basketball team). According to Lozano, one of them died from a brain hemorrhage, one died in a street related crime where he was "shot up at a gas station trying to protect his baby mama," and the other was "beat to a pulp by his dad."

Despite heavy violence, around 230 students are currently enrolled at ACCA. For a high school, it's a number he describes as 'shockingly low.' Surprisingly, of those 230 students, 160 are signed up for the Austin Boys & Girls Club — nearly 70 percent of the school's entire population.



The Austin Boys & Girls Club is what is referred to as a "school-based club." Unlike traditional clubs (who have their own building), school-based clubs are often confined to a single classroom. Photo by: Jalen Taylor (MEDILL)

"Our kids are trying their best not to be products of their environment," said Englewood Area Director, Jamara Hal, explaining why so many kids voluntarily choose to participate in their programs. "We have so many kids who come from a bad environment, but they get an outlet when they come here where they can express themselves and change who they are."

The Organization

Established in 1902, the Boys & Girls Club is one of the oldest youth development organizations in all of Chicago. With 24 club locations dispersed throughout the city, it makes sense why they'd have locations in Englewood and Austin — two of the city's [most dangerous](#) neighborhoods. Although their facilities are nearly 30 minutes apart, their club members share many of the same struggles.

"We have a lot of kids who are affected by gang violence, so they try to say, 'I'm not going to make it to 18, because my brother didn't,'" explained Hal. "Or they say, 'My mom didn't graduate from high school, so I'm not going to either.' We try to show them there's avenues they can take to [do better], and we teach that through our programming."

Offering a variety of youth enrichment programs such as Lunch Brunch, Passport to Manhood, Smart Girls, Money Matters, Triple Play and more, the Boys & Girls Club, by virtue of its amazing staff, is committed to fulfilling their mission, “Enabling all young people, especially **those who need us most**, to reach their full potential as productive, caring, responsible citizens.”

In large part, they’ve been [extremely successful](#) in doing so. But it hasn’t been easy, given the volatile state of Chicago’s historically dangerous West Side.



“I don’t think about safety. It doesn’t come to my mind because I see the need. And that’s my mission: to be there for those who need us the most. **And these kids need us more than anything.**” – Englewood Area Director, Jamara Hal.

“We’re fighting a system where our boys are more inclined to be outside in the streets,” said Lozano, reflecting on the many challenges of serving an underprivileged community. “I’m not going to lie to you, [most of] my kids either have a gang related family member, or they themselves have been influenced to become a gang member. If we’re going to make a change in this community, we first have to make a change in our kids.”

For the past three years, that’s exactly what he’s been trying to do.

The Impact

While Lozano’s official job as Club Manager is largely administrative (requiring him to answer phones, attend meetings and figure out ways to run the club as efficiently as possible), in pursuit of his mission, he’s taken on a much larger role by serving as the club’s de facto father figure.

“If you ask around, some of my kids have only guardians; they don't have their actual parents in their lives,” said Lozano, explaining the significance of his newfound role. “Some of them have only one household parent, and most of the time, it's the mother, not the father.” (According to [City-Data.com](#), 20.3% of households in Austin are classified as “single-mother households,” compared to 16% in Chicago as a whole). “To satisfy their needs, I have to be able to step up and be that person.”

Whether it's showing them how to fill out a job application, teaching them how to dress properly, coaching them through an interview, helping them prepare for college or even consoling them during times of hardship, Lozano has stepped up to the plate, successfully filling a void for the city's most troubled youth. While his extraordinary impact is immediately felt by everyone around him (Particularly those within ACCA's four walls), to the outside world, his efforts seem to go unnoticed. **And he's not the only one.**

“It's very disheartening,” said Hal. “Because even though we are in an underserved community, [working with disadvantaged youth] has many rewards that a lot of people don't get to see or hear about.”

“[In Englewood], we do community service with our kids to show them [change] starts right here with you. We host peace walks during the summertime, where our kids make signs saying, ‘No shooting, I want to live.’ We walk around the neighborhood with police escorts, and we get a lot of support from people honking their horns because it shows our kids are trying to change the environment that they're in.”

The Future

Despite valiant efforts, a dark cloud continues to loom over the impoverished West Side community. “It's just unfortunate,” said Angella Roberts-Smith, Director of Intervention at BUILD, Inc. (Broader Urban Involvement & Leadership Development), describing the area's negative perception. “We'd like to think that ourselves, as well as other organizations in the Austin area have played a part in reducing the violence, [and slowly, [but surely](#), we have], but we still have that reputation [as a violent community].”

“I can't tell you Austin is the best place to be, because it's not,” said Lozano, recounting horror stories in his head from his early days working at the Boys & Girls Club. “But what I can say is that, in the three years that I've been here, I've seen it change drastically.” (In 2024, [PropertyClub](#) ranked Austin as the tenth most dangerous neighborhood in all of Chicago, a significant improvement from last year's ranking at seventh).

“Unfortunately, there's always going to be misconceptions [about this place] based on what people say, and your opinion [likely] won't change until you come here and experience it for yourself. Once you do that, I'll guarantee it's not as bad as you always hear. Once you meet the kids, the neighborhood, the administration here at the school, you'll get to see **there's positive things happening in this community**. But you'll never know that until you come to this place yourself.”