

Peter Fortenbaugh and Jenny Obiaya, co-CEOs of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula, at the Moldaw-Zaffaroni Clubhouse in East Palo Alto, one of three such community hubs that the nonprofit organization operates.





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*Under its current leadership, a nonprofit that serves kids in the community has vastly broadened its offerings — and shows no signs of slowing down.*

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A straight-A student throughout her Cleveland high school years whose determination led her to go on to graduate from Harvard University, **Jenny Obiaya** nevertheless often harbored searing doubts — about her worth in the world, as well as her place in it.

Of mixed race, the youngest daughter of a Nigerian father and a St. Louis-born mother of Irish and German heritage, she would glance around her advanced-placement high school classes or the lecture halls of the intimidating Ivy League campus and see few who looked like her, making her ponder if she truly belonged.

But as she learned first-hand from her education-minded father and altruistic social worker mother, the right guidance from the right people at the right time can kindle the confidence to surmount almost any uncertainty.

It's that distinct perspective, plus years of experience as an educator, that she brings to the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Peninsula. After serving as its chief program officer for a year, she was promoted in October 2021 to co-CEO, becoming only the second woman of color to lead this venerable organization founded in 1958 to serve at-risk youths.

"It's exciting for me to be in this role," Obiaya, 35, says. "If students see me and feel that I belong here, that's really powerful. I hope it inspires them by showing them what's possible."

She shares that top leadership position with — and will eventually succeed — fellow Harvard graduate **Peter Fortenbaugh**, who has been diagnosed with late-stage cancer.

Fortenbaugh, 54, who turned his back on a flourishing career in tech and consulting to head the Menlo Park-based nonprofit for the past 20 years, is believed to be its longest-tenured CEO. As long as his health allows, he plans to continue dedicating himself to the organization that he credits with enriching his life beyond measure.

"I want to be someone who can help others, not someone who feels sorry for himself," he explains. "At the end of the day, what I care about most is having an equitable community and society, where everyone has a decent shot. That mission is my true north. And there's nothing I'd rather do with my time now."

"Peter is such an incredibly selfless and passionate leader," Obiaya says. "He is a big reason why I joined BGCP."

Fortenbaugh can't envision a better person to

carry on his legacy than Obiaya, who has been a teacher and principal at charter schools in New York's Harlem and Hell's Kitchen, as well as a managing director for Teach For America.

The Peninsula may be a gilded silicon land of opportunity, but Fortenbaugh and Obiaya believe there's never been a greater need here for BGCP's enrichment classes, homework support, sports leagues, career guidance and mental health services. Because even in a region of obscene wealth, glaring pockets of impoverishment still exist, particularly in East Palo Alto, eastern Menlo Park and the North Fair Oaks section of Redwood City — all underserved areas where BGCP concentrates its efforts. Indeed, 25 percent of students in these communities are homeless or in foster care, according to BGCP statistics. Moreover, 70 percent don't read at grade level, 35 percent don't graduate from high school and only 7 percent have a parent who attended college.

With 220 staff members, BGCP now serves 2,500 students, from kindergarten to college. On his watch, Fortenbaugh has leveraged connections, enlisting former Golden State Warriors star **Kevin Durant** to fund the first year of college for four BGCP students, and swayed 23andMe CEO and cofounder **Anne Wojcicki** to become an advisory council member. During the recent BGCP 2022 Youth of the Year ceremony — which celebrated finalists **Kaeja Byrd**, **Maria Chapa Maldonado**, **Ian Motuliki** and **Xitlali Curincita**, who was selected as the chapter's representative at a statewide event — the entrepreneur, along with her sister, YouTube CEO **Susan Wojcicki**, pledged to match every \$25,000 donation made that night.

Fortenbaugh also expanded the nonprofit's reach from only after-school programs to partnering with schools to provide services from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. When he joined the organization, BGCP had four sites. It now operates at 17 locales, with 14 of them conveniently on school campuses. All told, students receive 740 hours annually of expanded learning time — equal to 100 extra days of school.

"BGCP provides a beautiful opportunity to

give our students a more robust experience," says **Amika Guillaume**, principal of East Palo Alto Academy, a charter high school where at any one time, one-third of its 360 students, primarily first-generation youths of color, make use of BGCP programs. "At lunch time, you'd have a hard time distinguishing my staff from theirs because they are an integrated part of our campus. That means that even at a time when staffing is so difficult, there are more adults connecting with students, ensuring they're making thoughtful decisions."

When the pandemic hit, the organization rallied to make use of its clubhouse kitchens to cook and distribute 480,000 meals to families in need; established in-person learning hubs for students to access reliable Wi-Fi, laptops and tutoring services; and hosted pop-up vaccination events.

Obiaya took on the co-CEO reins in the midst of all that, relishing rolling up her sleeves to tackle the quick thinking and problem-solving required. It's what she's always done, from the time she was a teenager, tutoring other students or volunteering at the community center where her mother worked with disabled children.

As a teacher in New York, she thrilled to see the transformation in her students

when they received the attention they deserved. She remembers one fourth grader who lacked self-esteem and interest in school, blossoming under her tutelage in a science class when they studied animals. He not only began to show up to class eagerly but went on to reap the highest score in the New York state science exam.

"Your zip code often dictates what's accessible to you," says Obiaya, the mother of twin 6-year-old boys. "There's no reason everyone shouldn't have access to truly excellent opportunities, no matter where they live."

She looks forward to accomplishing that on an even larger scale with BGCP, which is on track this school year to serve the most students it ever has.

"Do I want to crush it in this role? Absolutely!" she says. "But mostly, I want to do right by this organization and this community. I feel the responsibility. But it's a good pressure to have." **NHC**

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— Peter Fortenbaugh