



This article was originally published in Youth Service, Inc.'s Newsletter in January 2022. In January 2023, Youth Service, Inc. merged with People's Emergency Center under the new name HopePHL. Visit [hopephl.org](http://hopephl.org) for more information. The volunteers and project described in the article are current as of March 9, 2023 and we are grateful for their continued support and encouragement of YES youth.

### Volunteer Spotlight: Colin Pustilnik and Chris Majors

It is a Sunday morning at Youth Service, Inc.'s (now called HopePHL) Youth Emergency Service (YES) teen shelter and Colin Pustilnik is walking around the lounge trying to get sleepy teenagers motivated for another Sunday Wellness Workout session, while his volunteer partner Chris Major sets up the workout area. Pustilnik, a sales leader at Tango, and Major, Corporate & Foundation Relations director at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) have been doing this each Sunday for the past 6 years.

"Chris and I are good friends, because we share a feeling that when we spread peace and love, we find happiness", said Pustilnik.

The driving force for them to start this weekly program was to provide a source of health, motivation, and a positive outlet for the youth that reside at YES. Colin's motivation for continuing the program for the last 5 years is the lack of support and resources he found when he experienced temporary housing alone as a teen. On the other hand, Chris is motivated by helping others the way he was helped as a youth.

"When a person experiences a lot of adversity, or negative energy directed at them at a young age, it's hard to know anything else exists. Then, as they grow older, that's the only world they know and they continue spreading that pain, at no fault to themselves. The thought was that if we could help those young people and staff to spread positive energy, health, and inspiration, it called to us," said Major.

Through combined experiences in athletics, leadership, and education in positive psychology, they have been able to help these kids learn about work ethic, perseverance, and kindness.

### A Big Sweaty Metaphor for Life

Colin and Chris lead a weekly workout, using Johnson and Johnson's 7 Minute Workout (<https://7minuteworkout.jnj.com/>), in an effort to teach the teens at YES how to use athletics as a positive outlet for addressing stress and life's challenges. Exercise has been shown to dramatically improve ones' mental and physical health.



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"Nobody wants to start working out, but as soon as you do, you're so grateful you did and everyone is smiling," said Pustilnik. "These kids are going through a lot; but in these workouts, you can learn about resilience, sweat out the inner hater and feel great when finished."

"Our Sunday Workouts are really a big sweaty metaphor for life," continued Master. "If you can work hard and overcome challenges in the workout, then you can do it later when things get difficult in other life situations."

The duo's goal is to use exercise to help the teens residing at YES feel better and give them the tools to make them feel better outside of the weekly workout sessions.

"Everyone can relate to loneliness, not having the love and support many people take for granted or having someone in their lives who is committed to their safety and wellbeing," said Major. "At the most basic level, we are really there to be caring adults who are in their lives regularly, showing up weekly."

"When you feel healthy and strong, and have a positive outlet to release stress, we think that can help these teens find happiness and a better life," continued Pustilnik.

The workouts also serve as an opportunity to teach the youth leadership skills. Often, they will have a youth who has participated in a previous workout come to the front and help lead the sessions. After the workout is complete, they lead a conversation about character strengths ([www.viacharacter.org/character-strengths](http://www.viacharacter.org/character-strengths)), which scientists in positive psychology identify as the positive traits in all people and use as a common language to discuss the 24-character strengths that make up what's best about our personality.

"Before the exercise, we remind the teens that everyone has each of the various character strengths, some are more present, others are less strong but we all have them all," said Major.

The goal of this post workout activity is to help the teens learn to recognize their various strengths as well as the strengths of their peers and give them a language of positivity. Each teen is handed a card with a character strength written on the front and a definition and example on the back. The group then goes around the circle, discussing the character strengths on the cards. After identifying the character strengths, they have a ritual of sharing the strengths they see in each other in a call and response exercise where one person says, "I have a recognition," and the group responds "Recognize!" This activity helps the teens in overcoming anxieties around public speaking, but also recognizing and sharing positivity to help someone else feel seen, creating a shared language of positivity.

"The post-workout conversations are a really beautiful thing," said Pustilnik. "These teens are often hearing negative things about themselves, their lives, where they come from,



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and sometimes worse. But we're working with them and trying to provide the tools, through these character strengths, to give them a vocabulary of positivity to describe what is best about them and all of us."

"You're seeing some of the most human and beautiful moments, overcoming their adversity, and getting a chance to recognize something positive in everyone. Developing positive relationships – with caring adults, their peers, and, perhaps most importantly, themselves – is key to developing resilience," continued Major.

### **A Lasting Impact**

The lessons learned during the Sunday workout sessions, have had a long-lasting impact on the teens at YES, even after their time in the program has come to an end. A former resident of YES came up to Colin after recognizing while walking down the street. The young adult came up to him saying, "Thank you so much! I still do my workouts and I'm going to school for nursing. These workouts inspired me, they really helped me!"

"These type of stories and interactions with the youth is what keeps us going," said Pustilnik. "Showing gratitude is one of the character strengths, it was a really powerful moment in my life."

### **Sharing Life Experiences**

In addition to the Sunday workout sessions, Colin and Chris have tapped into their own professional networks to try to provide different career exposure experiences for the teens outside of Youth Emergency Service (YES). The goal of these experiences is to help the teens use the lessons learned during the workout and character strengths conversations in the world as well as to expose them to different career paths. This exposure is to try to inspire the youth to start thinking about what they want to do with their lives and help them see a future that gives them something to work toward.

Through the duo's various connections with groups such as Jimmy's BBQ, CHOP, Stephen Stars restaurants, Willisbrook and Sugartown Strawberry Farms, and Tangoe; people such as Alfred Binford, Gregory Dockery, Kevin Bunting, Melissa Johnson, Christopher Arlene and Ernest Miller they have been able to provide teens with experiences they may never have gotten otherwise.

"We have found willing restaurants to provide amazing food and meals for the kids and staff," said Pustilnik. "Jimmy's BBQ and Stephen Starr's El Vez have both let the kids experience what dining and exceptional food service can feel and taste like and Tangoe who's helped sponsor some of the dining. Peloton's athletic trainers have been great too, helping to give inspirational workout quotes that Chris and I steal allowing us to have the needed verbiage to push the kids and staff. Outside of the city, Willisbrook and Sugartown Strawberry Farms have let us come out with the kids and staff to enjoy nature, interact with animals, while teaching the kids about agriculture, sustainability,



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animals and kindness. Alfred Binford, Kevin Bunting and Gregory Dockery have welcomed the teens to tour technology centers, provided education about technology, food, talks about work ethic, talks about overcoming adversity and inspirational messaging.

These experiences have opened the doors to have conversations about careers in the hospitality, agriculture, and technology industries, as well as entrepreneurship.

As Pustilnik says, "Spread health and spread love."

If you are interested in learning how you can get involved as a volunteer at HopePHL please contact Trish Downey at 267-777-5811 or [tdowney@hopephl.org](mailto:tdowney@hopephl.org). If you'd like to support HopePHL as a donor please visit: <https://www.hopephl.org/donate.html>.



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