

WORK&PLAY

Michael Joelson learned to play chess from his father when he was 7 years old. But even he could not have predicted how the game of strategy would become his life's work.

The Cleveland Heights chess enthusiast said he became serious about chess in his 20s, playing in his first chess tournament at 25. He frequented coffee shops, playing with anyone who would sit across from him. Then a friend, an international chess master, really cranked up his interest in the game.

In 1995, Mr. Joelson met a group of professional chess teachers from Russia who were in Northeast Ohio starting school chess programs. He was intrigued by the idea and took a job teaching for them once he graduated from college. In 2001, the group formed Chess4Success, a nonprofit organization using grant dollars to teach chess in the Cleveland Municipal School District.

"Chess actually involves complicated decision-making," Mr. Joelson said. "They have to be able to think very independently, and they have to extract principles out of complicated situations."

A few months ago, the group changed its name to Progress With Chess after finding an Oregon-based organization with a similar

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MICHAEL JOELSON

**Chess enthusiast
President, Progress With Chess**



JANINE BENTIVEGNA

Michael Joelson, president of Progress With Chess, oversees 15 chess instructors for Cleveland-area schools.

name. Along with the name change, the group has moved into a new office in the Fairhill Center in Cleveland.

Mr. Joelson, now president of Progress With Chess, oversees 15

chess instructors for about 35 Cleveland-area schools. His clientele runs the gamut from the wealthiest private schools to inner-ring suburban schools to Cleveland public schools.

Along with teaching chess, Progress With Chess also offers chess camps, exhibitions and lectures, as well as state championship adult and scholastic tournaments.

"We believe in using chess as an educational tool to help students increase their critical thinking skills with the goal to increase academic involvement," Mr. Joelson said.

While most of Mr. Joelson's chess students will never play in a tournament, he never stops encouraging them to try.

"We believe even if they never become tournament players, they still benefit in learning this game," Mr. Joelson said. "It also creates a social outlet with people of all ages and nationalities and income levels, and it's just a very diverse mixture of people."

Mr. Joelson also is former president of the Ohio Chess Association and president of Ohio Scholastic Chess Association, which offers scholastic tournaments to

players 19 and younger. Mr. Joelson said there has been a big boom in scholastic chess throughout the United States in the last 10 to 15 years.

— *Kimberly Bonvissuto*