



Detective Carl Bowers with the Cleveland Police Department congratulating one of the winners of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District event hosted by Progress With Chess.

Progress With Chess

A Cleveland chess devotee's dream and dedication have led to thousands of children discovering the joys of chess.

By David Presser

Although Cleveland chess has a vibrant history and had many strong players during the last half of the 20th century (including GMs Pal Benko, Gregory Serper, Alex Yermolinsky, and Anatoly Lein), there were very few scholastic chess programs. That changed when Michael Joelson incorporated Progress With Chess in 2001.

Founder and President Michael Joelson is a national master who began teaching chess in after-school programs in 1995 with a small company founded by a Russian family. When the company founders left Cleveland, Mike formed Progress With Chess (PWC). Mike has since organized and directed hundreds of state and local tournaments and has been the personal coach of 10 Ohio scholastic champions and one national scholastic champion. Mike says his secret for coaching so many champions is “teaching students to have a love for the game.” Progress With Chess has now initiated chess programs in more than 100 Cleveland area schools and recreation centers.

Progress With Chess is a non-profit corporation dedicated to

improving the lives of students and others through chess. Why a non-profit? “I wanted to teach chess in low income areas, and most foundations won't give grants unless you are a non-profit,” explains Joelson.

It has been 34 years since the landmark report, *A Nation At Risk*, warned us of “the rising tide of mediocrity” in U. S. public schools, but we are still at risk. By developing the cognitive abilities of children, chess instruction such as provided by PWC helps teachers in different academic areas address specific proficiency outcomes as well as improve discipline and the social skills of children. Harold O. Levy, former Chancellor of the Board of Education of New York City, wrote, “I have witnessed how chess works as an educational tool ... The Chess in the Schools program made a profound difference in the lives of hundreds of thousands of children in proving to them that they can succeed in their intellectual pursuit.” Many of the abilities essential to mastering chess are also important in everyday life.

Chess is known to be effective for controlling substance abuse and



Michael Joelson, founder of Progress With Chess, is "teaching students to have a love for the game."

lack of discipline. Joyce Brown, former Assistant Principal at the Roberto Clemente School in New York, wrote, "The incidents of suspension and outside altercations have decreased by at least 60 percent since these children became interested in chess." And Rachel Lieberman, former Director of Prevention Programs at US Chess, noted, "Agencies such as the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, and the American Academy of Pediatrics have endorsed chess as a tool for prevention of negative behavior." Various surveys have reported between 10 percent and 20 percent recidivism for prisoners who are involved with chess compared to 90 percent for other prisoners.

CLEVELAND METROPOLITAN SCHOOL DISTRICT CHESS PROGRAM

Former Cleveland Municipal School District CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett was anxious to have a chess program in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) after seeing the positive impact of New York City's Chess In The Schools program on academic performance in 175 schools. In 2001, Progress With Chess acquired funding to teach chess in the Cleveland Public Schools through the generosity of Frank Sullivan, a chess enthusiast and CEO of RPM International, a multi-billion dollar Ohio company that makes coatings, specialty chemicals, and sealants. Sullivan has donated money to PWC every year as part of his effort to improve the community and advance education.

The chess program has provided instruction to more than 500 CMSD students every year and has been enthusiastically supported by administrators, principals, teachers, and students. Chess instruction now takes place once a week for 15 weeks during the regular school day. Jeff Hitchcock, a teacher in the CMSD K-8 chess program, says, "I find teaching in CMSD schools very rewarding! Some of the kids who have a bad attitude, when they get involved in chess, go through good changes as chess is something positive in their lives. Many children who are labeled with learning disabilities have excelled at chess and even won trophies at the Chess Challenge tournament."

For many years Progress With Chess offered CMSD students discounts for Greater Cleveland Scholastic Chess League rated events. However, Mike Joelson eventually realized that "discounts were insufficient to get enough CMSD students involved in rated chess because of roadblocks such as collecting money, transportation, and chaperoning." Consequently, several years ago PWC began offering free US Chess memberships and free entry fees to CMSD students who play in the Scholastic League's four tournaments. This has worked well with the help of volunteers from school staff who assist with transportation and chaperoning, and the onerous task of collecting money from parents is no longer necessary. Removing the financial obstacles resulted in a dramatic increase in attendance by CMSD students in the four League events. More than 100 CMSD students have taken advantage of the opportunity to obtain a national chess rating, and these students are becoming more competitive in the League's tournaments. CMSD students may also choose to play in any of the 30 US Chess rated tournaments that PWC offers every year.

The CMSD has purchased chess sets for all participating schools and has covered many of the expenses involved in the year-end Chess Challenge, a tournament attended by 500 students. All participants receive a free lunch, play in simultaneous exhibitions, are given t-

FACES ACROSS THE BOARD

By AL LAWRENCE



BENJAMIN SHOYKHET

CITY OF CRYSTAL LAKE PARK, MISSOURI

Chess paid for his poodle

At eight, Ben "heard people at school talking about the chess club." Impatient with waiting for his parents to learn and then teach him, he fetched a book from the library. "I taught myself at night with a flashlight, military men versus Lego figures," he recalls. Ben is now number 28 on the US Chess Under-12 September rating list. Dad and mom never learned, but "now know not to call the knight a 'horse.'"

Ben attends Ladue Middle School in the morning but in the afternoon trains with GM Susan Polgar at her SPICE program. "I've been lucky enough to have been taught by several of the Webster University team members," including several grandmasters. "They know so much, and are patient with me."

Ben also likes fencing, running, reading, acting and playing the piano but credits chess with a major impact. "It teaches me how to prioritize my school work and how to study. It also teaches me to be patient, because sometimes you can lose for a silly reason. But chess is a long-term sport—not a sprint! My rating will go up and down."

But one of the happiest benefits of his chess is named Rook. "My parents said no to us getting a dog. I begged and begged, but they still said no." Ben offered a bargain. If he could win enough money at chess in one month to buy the dog they wanted, would mom say yes? "She didn't think I could do it." His brothers did his chores so he could study even harder.

"Now we have a black standard poodle named Rook. We have lots of jokes in the house. If you jump over the dog, you can scream out, 'Castle!' and when she does something wrong, we have 'a bad rook.'"

Write to faces@uschess.org.

shirts and trophies, and play chess against Cleveland police officers and detectives. The Cleveland Public Schools provides transportation for all students. Vincent Marquard, former Deputy Commissioner of Athletics and Student Activities, remarked that “The annual Chess Challenge tournament ... is something that all of the students look forward to each year. The expertise that Progress With Chess and its staff bring to the Chess Challenge is remarkable.”

The Chess Challenge is held at the Cleveland Public Library, home of the world-famous John G. White Chess Collection. For the past 16 years, the library has donated space for two days during the Chess Challenge as well as contributing hundreds of hours of staff time to help plan and conduct this event. Media coverage has included front page articles and photographs in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (Ohio’s largest daily newspaper) and the *Call and Post*, a local newspaper which focuses on the black community.

Five years ago Michael Joelson met with CMSD CEO Eric Gordon to outline ideas for expansion of PWC’s chess programs. Mr. Gordon was very receptive and gave his approval for PWC to move forward. Progress With Chess is seeking additional funding to accommodate the many schools that have expressed interest in PWC’s chess programs.

SUBURBAN PARENT PAY PROGRAMS

The impetus for a large number of suburban chess programs has been provided by parents of children with a serious interest in chess who have approached school principals requesting that PWC be part of their after-school offerings. PWC suburban programs are parent pay except for a few programs that are district-funded. The majority of PWC’s income derives from these parent pay programs, which include after school programs at schools, recreation centers and enrichment centers; chess camps; chess tournaments; and tournament training classes for the more ambitious players. Some of the profits from these activities help fund PWC’s efforts in low income inner city schools.

Progress With Chess is involved with other chess activities in the Greater Cleveland area, including organizing and directing the Ohio High School Middle School Championship with typically 200 players from all over Ohio; the annual Greater Cleveland Scholastic Chess League, a series of four monthly tournaments; giving free simultaneous exhibitions at various community events, including local street festivals and the Cleveland International Film Festival (which promoted the 2012 chess movie



At least 500 Cleveland Metropolitan School District children are receiving chess instruction annually. Here they play at the Cleveland Public Library, which also houses the John G. White Chess Collection which was the subject of a Chess Life cover story in the December 2012 issue.

Brooklyn Castle); offering seven one-week summer chess camps; and organizing adult and scholastic Ohio Chess Championship events.

The organization’s staff are a diverse group of men and women of many nationalities and races who love teaching and promoting chess! Program Manager Roy-Allen Bumpers says he chose to work for PWC because, “I have always had an interest in the game and was really impressed with the model Mike created ... it allowed me to do something I was passionate about.” Long-time instructor Mike Reeves, a retired postal worker and national expert, emphasizes, “PWC is a quality organization that not only deals with the kids playing chess, but also deals with the development of the kids socially and emotionally.”

Primary funders have included RPM International, the Cleveland Foundation, the George Gund Foundation, and the United Black Fund. Additional support has come from the Cleveland Police Department. The Cleveland Police Patrolmen’s Union and the Black Shield (an African-American Patrolmen’s organization) have awarded scholarship money to the schools.

Progress With Chess has generated more than 2,000 new US Chess memberships (more than 1,200 in the past two years) and Mike Joelson was deservedly given the US Chess meritorious service award in 2016.

Readers can visit PWC’s website at progresswithchess.org.

In Memoriam: GM William Lombardy (1937-2017)

Chess players around the world mourned the loss of Grandmaster William Lombardy, who died on October 13, 2017, in Martinez, California. Hailed as one of the most promising chess players of his generation, GM Lombardy became the first American to win the World Junior Championship (1957) and the first to achieve a perfect 11-0 score—a feat no one has ever duplicated. He also shared first in three U.S. Opens and represented the United States in numerous international team competitions.

Although GM Lombardy reaped numerous titles, awards, and accolades throughout his career, he ultimately became best known for coaching Bobby Fischer during the 1972 World Championship in Reykjavik, Iceland.

Chess Life’s January 2018 issue will be a special remembrance issue honoring GM Lombardy’s life and career. If you have a story or memory about GM Lombardy that you would like to share, please send it to dllucas@uschess.org by November 22.