



## Executive Director's Message

*Chris Burns*  
*Executive Director*

As a person who worked his way through college running a video store (for those born before Redbox, Netflix and the myriad of streaming platforms these days), I often think metaphorically about movies and how they relate to a variety of situations. In many ways, the past year felt like the Bill Murray classic, *Groundhog Day*. We awakened each day hoping that the number of infections would decrease, businesses would reopen, and we could bid COVID farewell. However, the pandemic persisted, its effects reappeared each day and the adjustments Boys Republic made as an agency endured and became the new normal.

Remote schooling with casework staff wearing new hats as tutors and teachers lingered throughout the year. Cottages were separated at meal times as a safety measure to limit the possibility of transmission. On the positive side, our students got to know the local community much better as hikes through the community became a staple activity to help break the monotony of being in the cottage so much more due to the online schooling. The impact lingered long enough to turn the postponed Friends of Steve McQueen Car Show of 2020 into a full cancellation in the Fall. The agency had largely avoided COVID+ staff and students through all of 2020 until the first big wave hit the nation as the holiday gatherings of Thanksgiving and Christmas resulted in a spike of positive tests that we were unable to avoid as well.

Our newly dedicated culinary center was subject to the same restrictions as all food-serving venues and that flurry of activity had been reduced to simply preparing the meals for our students and staff each day with instruction in the new classroom and teaching bakery. The culinary center,



*During fiscal 2021, vocational training in the Culinary Arts Center continued despite the pause on catering events to the community. Culinary Arts students operated the Family Meals Program, which provided staff members with scratch-made to-go dinners.*

in many ways, became the model for how the agency would pivot to adjust to the ever-changing times as they first turned the Bistro into an in-house grocery store where staff could purchase items that they were unable to find in their local markets. It grew immediately in its popularity as it also provided an environment that had far less traffic as the world was just beginning to understand what level of community engagement was safe.



Not wanting to see the progress of the culinary center completely arrested, the teaching staff and students developed a take-home menu of dinners that would become the “Family Meals” program. It was a wonderful synergy of keeping the learning going for our students and assisting our essential staff by giving them an opportunity to take home hot meals that were prepared for them within minutes of them finishing their shifts.

The early wave of the shutdown reduced our student population by 40% as county offices, probation departments, juvenile halls and courthouses were nearly completely closed. By late summer, we began to see referrals climb with the reopening of most of our government partners only to watch them plummet again with the holiday wave of positive COVID cases that



*FAMILY REUNIFICATION: A student and his family meet on the Chino Hills campus.*

began around Thanksgiving. This was an interesting time as leaders of agencies throughout the State gathered

remotely with their counterparts with the counties and state agencies to determine the safest path forward in providing 24-hour treatment to our youth. While implementing an exhaustive list of safety measures, we remained firm on continuing to allow family visitation and on having students continue to earn home passes to spend time with their families. This was a minority opinion among leaders around the State as both were viewed as potentially risky for the students themselves and for the possibility of infecting other youth and staff as they returned to the cottage. However, we favored the perspective that our fundamental role was to utilize all of the components of our treatment program to prepare our students to go home and reintegrate into their families successfully. Isolating them from their families felt incongruent and counterproductive, so we simply stressed the necessary precautions with students and families that must occur for visits and passes to continue. Our steadfastness was rewarded as we only experienced a single case of COVID tied to a visit with the great majority being related to staff interactions in the world outside of Boys Republic.

As with most of the world, the guidebook hadn't been written yet, but we worked diligently with leaders throughout the industry while holding fast to our time-honored principle of making sure that everything we do ultimately serves the best interests of the youth in our care. With that, I want to express my gratitude for the generations of supporters of Boys Republic that made it possible to sustain our staff and students throughout a year that was unparalleled in the challenges it presented.