

One thing that made Juan a typical kid was his belief that he was different. He liked to play, loved his mother and struggled with academics. For a little kid, struggling with academics is a frustrating and complex battle.

When he was about 7 years old, Juan went with his mother to the Boys & Girls Club of Washington County and joined a reading group in the club's Academic Success program.

"Even as a little kid, I knew I had a learning disability," he said, "I didn't know how to read, but I knew I had to get better at it."

Juan was matched with a caring, committed program leader named Jason who took a personal interest in each participant's success.

"He acted like I was a normal kid who could learn," he said. "Even when I had those moments when I didn't want to go because I couldn't read or didn't understand it, he didn't give up on me. He was always there for me."

Today, Juan is an 18-year-old high school graduate who will start college in fall. He was named the Washington County Club's Youth of the Year, is a staff member, and has never forgotten the monumental impact the club and a compassionate mentor had on him.

"I would not be who I am today without the Boys & Girls Club," he said. "I am a better student and a better person because of it. I have options. I have a future."

The Academic Success program provides thousands of elementary through high school students in the county with year-round educational activities, games and groups. It receives funding from the United Way of Washington County.

One of the key lessons Juan learned from the Boys & Girls Club is to not underestimate the impact an encouraging mentor can have on a child. It inspires him every day he works at the club.

"When I am at the club, I know I am there for one reason: to make these kids have the best time of their lives," Juan said. "If a kid is going through something, I want them to know I am there for them, just like someone was there for me."

"Thanks to the club, I have gone from a kid who needed a mentor to one who is one." Juan's inspirational story exemplifies the importance of a strong support system for youth in the community, said Jay Fisher, Boys & Girls Club of Washington County executive director.

"Juan was a member years ago and has grown into an outstanding young man who really embodies what the club is all about," Jay said. "Helping a child who could use some extra support to find success is what we do, and Juan is a great example of the impact the clubs make in the lives of youth here in Washington County."