

I am an American We are One Nation

WAR SURVIVOR BRINGS KIDS TOGETHER

4-H leader works to help youths of all backgrounds get to know each other

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Each week, this series will introduce you to an exceptional American who unites, rather than divides, our communities. To read more about the American profiled here and more average Americans doing exceptional things, visit onenation. usatoday.com.



BRYON HOULGRAVE/THE (DES MOINES, IOWA) REGISTER

John-Paul Chaisson-Cardenas

Profession: 4-H Youth Development Program leader

Age: 46 **Hometown:** Urbandale, Iowa **Mission:** To bring youths together from all backgrounds to learn from each other.

John-Paul Chaisson-Cardenas witnessed the civil war in Guatemala as a boy. The memory of it is at the root of everything he does today in America.

“I’ve seen what happens when the civility in a society disintegrates. I’ve seen what happens when people start disappearing because they have different opinions,” he said.

Chaisson-Cardenas, 46, the first Latino state youth leader in the 115-year history of 4-H, wants to bring youths of all backgrounds, not just farm kids, together to learn more about each other and learn to be civil.

Chaisson-Cardenas is part of a long effort to expand 4-H’s reach. Children of color now make up 13 percent of the 100,000 Iowa youths in 4-H.

As he walked through the State Science and Technology Fair of Iowa in Ames recently, where nearly a quarter of the participants come from 4-H programs, he stopped at the presentation of a young man wearing a turban.

J.J. Kapur, of Valley High School in West Des Moines, showed him his project, an experiment on bias. The student, who is Sikh, said he did the project after someone yelled to his father, “Osama, go back where you came from.” Chaisson-Cardenas’ family left Guatemala 25 years ago with three suitcases and eventually drove to Cheyenne, Wyoming. He was a lonely high school kid who didn’t speak English and was dyslexic but went on to earn a master’s degree at the University of Iowa and help inner-city kids in Chicago and rural Latinos in West Liberty, Iowa, before landing his job at 4-H in 2014.

He organized a 4-H group that combined immigrants from Africa with African-Americans. Native Americans joined Latinos in another group and learned their shared history.

“Because of the political climate in the last years, we’ve been working ... on bringing people together, from their culture, their sexual orientation, and having meaningful conversations,” he said. “The research is clear. One of the ways to bring people together is to actually bring them together. People are hard to dismiss when you know them.”

Q&A WITH JOHN-PAUL CHAISSON- CARDENAS

What does it mean to you to be an American?

I really love being an American. I love being a part of this country because of what it stands for. What people don’t realize is that around the world, this place is a beacon. Not because of what it is, but because of what it could be and the aspirations of equality, of having people be and belong in our country. To me that is what America is.

What moment touched and motivated you to launch this effort?

For me, youth are not only our future but they are much more diverse than the general population. When you start where youth are today, I truly believe they are ahead of us when it comes to inclusion and diversity and, more importantly, belonging. I truly believe that 4-H is an organization that can make a difference for every group in the United States — over 7 million youths in this country.

What gives you hope or what concerns you?

What gives me hope is youth. I work with over 100,000 youth in Iowa alone, so when I hear their voices and see them come together, that gives me hope. What worries me are actually the adults, the rhetoric out there that is destructive, that is divisive, that has taken us apart from the fundamental values that I believe this country is about — inclusion, diversity, bringing people together and being a beacon of hope for the rest of the world.

What do you hope to accomplish through your efforts?

What I want to do is allow youth to be themselves and understand how powerful they are. And at the same time understand how the other youth around them are powerful within themselves, no matter where you come from, no matter who you are, whether you are white or black, whether you are LBGT or you are not, it doesn’t matter to me. What I want them to do is feel good about themselves and find their own strengths.