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## **BOXING CLUB CAN SPREAD THE ‘LOVE’**

Helps underprivileged youngsters learn discipline and self-empowerment

**COURTNEY CROWDER**

USA TODAY NETWORK

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ZACH BOYDEN-HOLMES/USA TODAY NETWORK

**Senior Police Officer John Saunders is head coach of the Des Moines Police Boxing Club.**

### **John Saunders**

**Location:** Des Moines, Iowa **Age:** 52 **Profession:** Officer with Des Moines Police Department for 27 years and head coach of the Des Moines Police Boxing Club since 2008.

**Mission:** To use boxing to help underprivileged kids learn the discipline and self-empowerment that will allow them to succeed outside the ring.

Walking into the Des Moines Police Boxing Club feels like stepping into a pugilism-themed snow globe that’s been shaken up and left upside down.

The small gym is abuzz with the thud of landing blows and the ear-splitting beeps of the countdown clock keeping time. One group of students in the back completes calisthenics circuits while a pair punch bags nearby. By the ring, a coach teaches a student the finer art of shadowboxing as he watches a handful of other kids prep their gloves.

But what may seem like chaos is controlled under the watchful eye of Senior Police Officer John Saunders.

“I expect more from these kids than what they expect of themselves,” said Saunders, 52. “I’m pretty demanding, so if these kids can deal with me, they can definitely deal with what they face out beyond these walls.”

Founded in 2008, the club has a goal: to “keep kids off the street,” said Saunders, who has been in charge since the founding. The club is free for kids ages 10-18 who aren’t gang-affiliated and haven’t been in the juvenile justice system.

“We have someone from every ethnic group,” Saunders said. “What race you are, what gender, what religion, it matters not. I want everyone who comes in here to feel like they are part of our family.”

For Saunders, who isn’t married and doesn’t have children, these kids *are* his family, he stressed.

“The club was founded to give kids an alternative to running the neighborhood and to keep their minds occupied, but, to me, it goes way beyond that,” he said. “I check on their grades. If they get into trouble, I go follow up and see what’s going on.”

He paused: “I try to be more than their boxing coach.” While club members can participate in amateur fights, Saunders’ goal is simpler: He wants his students to graduate from high school.

“I don’t care what they decide to do; I just want them to be successful,” he said. “And I think the boxing club can help give them the discipline and the drive to do just that.”

## **Q&A WITH JOHN SAUNDERS**

### **What does it mean to you to be an American?**

It means everything to me. America is the greatest country in the world, so that just kind of speaks for itself.

### **What moment motivated you to become part of this effort?**

I can’t think of one moment, but basically just wanting to help people and help these kids. A lot of these kids don’t have any guidance, and a lot of these kids are lost, so if the boxing club can provide some guidance for these kids and some direction, especially for kids who don’t necessarily have direction, then we’ve served our purpose.

### **What gives you hope?**

What gives me hope are these kids. I can’t say enough about these kids. They carry the traits that as a community we should have: They are kind kids, respectful kids, loving kids, (and) a lot of times they are concerned more about me or others than they are about themselves. Those are the kind of traits that we need to get back to as a community.

### **What concerns you?**

What concerns me is the amount of violence that we see. ... I just want people to become more caring, more loving, more giving, and I think if we get back to those traits, I think we will be able to turn this situation (with the violence in our city) around.

### **What do you hope to accomplish through your efforts?**

Well, first and foremost, I want these kids to be good kids. I want these kids to be successful kids. I want these kids to be able to graduate high school. I want these kids to, beyond that, be successful in whatever they do. I don’t care what it is, I just want them to be successful at it, and I have no doubt and the boxing club has no doubt that that’s going to happen.