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## 10 teens in running for Youth of the Year

*They'll find out Saturday who carries clubs' title*

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At age 6, Armelia Benjamin found a place to escape hardships, play games and learn skills to work toward a better life.

"I saw my mother struggle, and I saw my aunt struggle just to feed us," said Benjamin, 18, now a pre-med student at Glendale Community College. "I don't want to have to make decisions like whether or not to turn the water off in order to keep the gas on or vice versa."

Benjamin, of Glendale, attended the Boys & Girls Clubs of Metropolitan Phoenix I.G. Homes Branch for 12 years. She now works at the branch and is one of 10 Valley students nominated for 2006 Youth of the Year.

The 10 teens from Phoenix and the West Valley find out Saturday who has won the title of Boys & Girls Clubs of Metropolitan Phoenix Youth of the Year during the Today's Kids, Tomorrow's Stars fund-raiser sponsored by Universal Technical Institute Inc.

Former UTI President and CEO Robert Hartman and wife, Janice, will serve as honorary chairmen at the \$500 per ticket banquet, held from 5:30 to 9 p.m. at the Arizona Biltmore Resort in Phoenix.

"Every year we hear new and amazing stories of our youth," said Amy Gibbons, president and executive director of Boys & Girls Clubs of Metropolitan Phoenix.

Gibbons called this year's group a testament to how the clubs can help youths.

"They are kids that have truly conquered insurmountable odds to become successful in their lives," she said.

Armelia's four siblings were split up between family members' homes and foster care when her mother entered a mental-health facility.

During one school year, Armelia traveled 20 miles each way on a city bus to get from her aunt's home in El Mirage to Alhambra High School in Phoenix. With plans to attend the University of Arizona and become a cardio-thoracic surgeon, Armelia wanted to continue at the school's medical magnet program and attend the Holmes branch after school. The city bus did not travel to El Mirage after 6 p.m., so during basketball season she would walk two miles from Sun City to El Mirage. She was a varsity basketball captain and ran track in high school.

Trina White, branch manager at the Holmes branch, said Armelia's "quiet strength and leadership" pushed her to the top of the list of those competing for the branch title.

"She rises to the occasion," White said. "When it's crunch time she wows everybody."

The 10 teens each receive a \$1,000 scholarship. The Youth of the Year winner will receive another \$1,000 and go on to the state competition, followed by the regional competition. Ultimately, five teens from across the United States will compete for the national title and a \$15,000 scholarship in September in Washington D.C.

The staff at each branch identifies a youth of year.

"They know and help grow those kids," said Bridget McDonald, area director for the clubs.

An independent group of community members selects the winner, who will be announced at Saturday's event. The nominees are judged on national criteria, including participation at the clubs, contributions to school, home and family, community involvement and their moral compass.

Every year, 26,500 children benefit from the Boys & Girls Clubs after-school youth development programs. Since 1947, the national organization has recognized youths who have faced difficult and challenging circumstances to realize their potential while learning responsible citizenship.

For information regarding the Today's Kids, Tomorrow's Stars, visit [www.bgcnp.org](http://www.bgcnp.org) or call (602) 954-8182.

<http://www.azcentral.com/community/peoria/articles/0310phx-youth0310Z3.html>