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Fortunate giver

By Yvonne Abraham

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Josh Kraft looks so uncomfortable he might turn inside out. He is jiggling his legs. Wincing. Leaning way back in his chair, as if willing himself into the next office.

"Ah, is this going to be about me?" he asks. "I got no problem talking about the clubs, but ah . . . I don't want to. . . . I'm just uncomfortable. . ."

Kraft took over as head of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Boston this month. And though everybody you talk to says he has a boatload of qualifications for the job, sitting still for interviews about himself isn't among them.

Kraft, 41, is the third of Bob and Myra Kraft's four sons. His parents, of course, are the bazillionaires who own the New England Patriots.

Born on third base, Josh Kraft is under no illusion that he hit a triple.

"I grew up in the lucky DNA club," he says. "I'm very fortunate."

He knows his parents' wealth has sometimes gotten him breaks he might not have deserved. This job isn't one of them. Never interested in any of the family businesses, he started as an intern at the Boys & Girls Club in South Boston, after graduating from college 18 years ago. There he chased down 20 at-risk children who were skipping middle school, staying on them every day to make sure they didn't drop out.

"I got a better education at D Street and Old Colony than I ever got at Williams College," he says. "It was life-changing."

He opened the Chelsea Boys & Girls Club at the Innes housing development in 1993, running some of the programs for the 75 children himself, taking them to city playgrounds for activities.

For years, the club was housed in the dingy basement at the old Chelsea High School.

But the children hung around, and despite the rotten pay and working conditions, the staff stayed, too.

"Every kid who comes through the door feels like they're part of something," he says. "There is an adult there who greets you by your first name every day. That has a huge impact on a kid."

His father worried about his son. Chelsea was grim back then.

The younger Kraft would leave family events to flip burgers at community cookouts, or go help a teen who had gotten arrested.

"Since he's been a young man, he's made decisions his mother and I have tried to talk him out of," Bob Kraft says.

Nobody in Chelsea cared who his parents were. And you certainly couldn't tell from looking at Josh Kraft. Polished he is not: He is a liberal cusser, and sartorially challenged (he recalls proudly that he was once likened to an unmade bed).

Chelsea's club grew, and Kraft still knew the children by name. Being a Kraft came in handy when it was time to get the program out of the basement.

"I'm not stupid," he says. "My parents did a \$2 million gift."

He raised upward of \$9 million more. The 44,000-square-foot Gerald and Darlene Jordan Boys and Girls Club/Kraft Family Youth Center opened in 2002. Now 1,500 children ages 6 to 18 come through those stylish doors on Willow Street each year for dance programs, tutoring, swim lessons, and free dinners.

The Clubhouse has saved children from drugs or gangs or worse by offering them something simple and distressingly elusive: consistent relationships with caring adults in a safe, comfortable place.

Bob Kraft traded concern for pride years ago.

"He's earned his own stripes," the father gushes. "He's pretty amazing, isn't he?"

Now Josh Kraft wants to double the number of children his clubs serve, to 28,000 within five years. And the CEO will do it with staff who work their hearts out for abysmal pay. Which is the main reason he would rather not be the focus of this column.

"I don't have to worry about money," he says. "Others here do, and they still do this. I have more respect for them."