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CROSSROADS

A Publication of The Greater Memphis Chamber





ADVANCING

Our Youth

By Lori Spicer

Fans of local basketball teams, from community leagues to collegiate teams to the NBA, will claim that Memphis is undeniably a basketball town. Many high-profile athletes had their start right here in this city, and some even return after retiring. Basketball is a common ground that brings this community together, uniting the young, the young at heart, and the seasoned veteran. Because for many area youth basketball is an escape from their day-to-day lives, Memphis Athletic Ministries (MAM) offers a welcoming environment in which youth sports contribute to participants' spiritual and academic advancement.

MAM is widely recognized for its organized basketball leagues, but the organization actually offers much more. Since its creation in 2001 as a nonprofit focused on community-wide sports activities, it has opened six neighborhood youth centers and added an academic curriculum. MAM takes a hands-on approach to reach at-risk youth (ages 6-18) from disadvantaged neighborhoods through high quality, year-round mentoring programs. The organization's programs address the emotional, social, physical, mental, and spiritual needs of the youth served. MAM's mission is to use organized sports to share and model Christ to urban, at-risk youth and to foster unity among diverse areas of the community.

MAM's president and co-founder Gib Vestal observes, "A close friend, Larry Lloyd, introduced me to MAM and it aligned perfectly with everything I loved – sports, youth, and spirituality." Throughout his life, Vestal had an interest in youth, "I was a coach prior to having children, while I raised my children and after they had all grown up. When I left the business world, I sought a job that offered me eternal significance." Vestal served as a Managing Director with Morgan Keegan, but today he is making a different type of investment in our area youth.

On a national scale the diminishing role of the nuclear family has caused a great deal of economic and social issues, which programs like MAM help address. "If we [the community] place greater emphasis on helping our youth, they will in turn be able to better serve our community more effectively," said Vestal. MAM provides mentoring for the youth it serves, and its staff members work alongside parents, offering continued support. "As we work to develop model citizens in these youth, we address urban areas from a spiritual standpoint because it not only changes the mindset of these youth, but also their hearts," said Vestal.

MAM's proven strategy has affected the lives of over 8,000 children; such numbers will continue to grow. "I want to be part of MAM until I graduate high school because it teaches me about basketball and also about Jesus," said Jonquil Jefferson, age 12, who attends Corey Middle School. The organization's program evaluations reveal MAM's influence on its participants: they live happier lifestyles, have better attitudes towards their peers and other races, take more personal responsibility, and greatly respect adults.

MAM not only rewards the youth the organization serves, but also its employees. "I chose to come to MAM because it is a community-oriented organization and I wanted to directly impact the community," said

Alphonso Saville, Full-time, Youth Coordinator of MAM. "No other professional entity offered me this type of exposure or experience. Coming here was a life choice." MAM offers its employees the opportunity to build relationships with the youth they serve. The organization's neighborhood centers and its community partnerships expand the number of opportunities available to area youth. These partnerships grant participating youth exposure to cultures and environments unlike their own, and foster lasting relationships between all economic and racial groups.

The organization has been strategic in its hiring process by reaching out to college graduates. "College grads are hired so the kids can emulate that career path," said Vestal. This method of hiring has been effective in establishing and maintaining lasting relationships with the youth and their parents. Many parents are pleased to see employees who are good role models for their children. For employees like Craig Howard, a Youth Coordinator of MAM, the familial atmosphere of the organization is what attracted him, "After leaving FCA (Fellowship of Christian Athletes), I wanted a position that offered a more narrow focus, and where I could build discipleship and relationships. MAM has offered me a deeper experience because I am able to build relationships with families and see kids who have a greater commitment to their faith, academics, and future outlook." MAM has been beneficial for not only the youth it serves, but all those who play a role in advancing this organization.

"Through MAM I have been offered a variety of experiences and have received a lot of opportunities that I may never have had the chance to do, said Jacquin Denton, age 15, MAM participant for 6 years. "The program has taught me discipline, has given me a more spiritual experience, and I will continue to be a part of this program." In a short time, MAM has reached a significant number of people; as it continues to build a solid curriculum, it will touch the lives of even more individuals. "Our program not only touches

the lives of those involved but the entire community, said Vestal. "Everyone has to realize our community must unite to move forward. What happens in South Memphis affects what happens in Collierville and vice versa; no amount of isolation can change that. We are one city and one community and we all have to pool together to make a difference."

