



Dropping In

Skateboarders stop by community center to show skills in Memphis Athletic Ministries competition

By Sara Patterson



Dorin Shafer, 6, from Memphis prepares to compete on the mini-ramp as local skaters met at the Greenlaw Community Center on Saturday.

Wearing his hospital identification wristband like a badge of honor, 18-year-old Brandon Gatewood of Olive Branch explained the circumstances that brought him to the bench inside the **Memphis Athletic Ministries-Greenlaw** Community Center Downtown.

He originally planned on competing in the skateboarding competition Saturday afternoon, but Friday he attempted to scale the stairs behind The Pyramid, fell and landed "wrong," he said, tearing his anterior cruciate ligament, or ACL.

Holding both crutches in one hand, Gatewood used the other to point out his friends in the crowd of about 30 kids jammed on top of a mini-half pipe ramp. These were the same cohorts who carried him to the car and drove him to Saint Francis Hospital after his spill.

"These are all really good kids," said Gatewood's mom, Sandra. "I'd rather pick my son up from the hospital after an accident than an overdose." Her views on the positive effects of skateboarding mirror those of many who advocate for the sport, such as JSAW, the nonprofit skateboarding ministry based in Minnesota that helped sponsor the free competition and skateboard clinic.

Youth skateboarders jumped across ramps and over rails outside of the community center as temperatures neared 70 degrees, the makeshift skating ramps a temporary solution until a proper public skatepark opens in the city.

In August, Memphis Mayor A C Wharton announced that the city's first skatepark, set to open September 2011, would be located in Tobey Park. This came months after a skateboard facility planned in Glenview Park was blocked by City Councilwoman Wanda Halbert.

"Skateboarding is a sport where you feel like you've really accomplished something," said Mark Jannetta of MAM-Greenlaw on Saturday. "Anybody can pick up a basketball and throw it, but when you land a trick for the first time, you get a sense of self-confidence. Falling down all the time and getting back up? That's building character."

Many of Saturday's competitors were regulars at the community center, like 13-year-old Jarrett Spinks, who started skateboarding five years ago in Southaven before the ramp was erected in the community center last year. "Skateboarding helped me stop being anti-social," he said.

One of the only female skaters present, LeVayda VanNockay, 10, started skateboarding last year and said she has already mastered several tricks like the "Stapler," "Drop in" and "360." "I (learn tricks) fast because I stay here for a long time," she said. "If I've almost got it, I keep trying until I get it."