

Team Work

Grizzlies foundation launches program during National Mentoring Month

By Aisling Maki

January is National Mentoring Month, and the Memphis Grizzlies TEAM UP Youth Mentoring Initiative is preparing to launch its new TEAM Mentoring program. Instead of traditional one-on-one mentoring, the new program, inspired by other successful models across the country, will feature a 1-to-3 adult-to-student ratio. “We’ve taken steps over the last six months to develop a new team mentoring program that will launch in a couple of weeks,” said Jennifer Turner Koltnow, executive director of the Memphis Grizzlies Charitable Foundation, the NBA team’s charitable affiliate, which focuses on serving at-risk Memphis youth and the organizations that support them. “The concept is linking teams of adult mentors to groups of kids.”

The team-mentoring pilot programs will be implemented in two public charter middle schools – Freedom Preparatory Academy and Power Center Academy – with additional partners being added in the coming months, once the new model is refined. Groups will meet one day a week over a 10-month period, and activities will address civic engagement, college attainment, cultural understanding, health and wellness, leadership and team-building skills. The program will also include group outings such as community service projects, college campus tours and Memphis Grizzlies basketball games. Koltnow said the program has already attracted a great deal of interest from civic organizations and corporations seeking employee volunteer opportunities. TEAM Mentoring will enable the foundation and its partners to reach more children, increase its volunteer base and foster retention among volunteers.

“We’ll be able to serve many more kids and have a built-in support system for the mentors where they’ll really be able to work together and share their collective experiences to support the kids,” Koltnow said. “The kids are going to have an opportunity to develop relationships with three people instead of just one.”

One of the benefits of a group-mentoring situation is that it’s more likely to attract much-needed male role models. While the Freedom Prep team will feature a mix of male and female students, the Power Center Academy program in Hickory Hill will feature all-male teams. “We do have more women mentors than men, and we need more male mentors,” Koltnow said. “The idea of sitting down with a kid may not be as natural to guys. They like to hang out and talk over a ball game. The idea of sitting down at a table in the school library doesn’t resonate with many men, but doing activities in a group might bring more guys out to participate in mentoring.”

Established in 2004, the Memphis Grizzlies Charitable Foundation in 2007 launched the TEAM UP Youth Mentoring Initiative to recruit and retain volunteer mentors and expand youth mentoring in the Greater Memphis Metropolitan area. “Our primary goal is to really ramp up participation in youth mentoring across the Memphis area,” Koltnow said. “The Memphis Mentoring Partnership, an affiliate of MENTOR/The National Mentoring Partnership, became part of the Grizzlies Foundation in 2008. “We’ve been pulling in lots of different organizations and integrating them into the network, particularly in the last two years since the Memphis Mentoring Partnership became part of our overall scope of youth mentoring,” said Koltnow, adding that the TEAM UP membership has increased by about 400 percent since it absorbed MMP.

TEAM UP’s many partners across the city – including Girls Inc., **Memphis Athletic Ministries**, Streets Ministries and Youth Villages – provide mentoring opportunities. TEAM UP has developed a solid partnership with Memphis City Schools CONNECT Mentoring Program. “We get technical support for mentors, talking and networking and connecting with other organizations,” said Nellie H. Powell, MCS CONNECT mentoring coordinator. “They reach people we can’t or haven’t been able to reach, and they support our mentors and do things we can’t do for them. And of course, there are the games and little extra perks like that.”

Other organizations, meanwhile, help recruit the mentors, often by hosting recruitment events. Koltnow said, “We’ve worked with organizations from Kiwanis to the Leadership Academy to different companies and faith-based organizations. If they bring in the people, we can deliver the program and really start to engage people. Likewise, they’ll follow up with their members or employees to continually enforce the need for volunteer mentors.”

Numerous studies have shown that no matter what obstacles a child faces, having a mentor in his or her life can make a world of difference. But it’s a commitment that Powell said cannot be taken lightly. “Mentoring is a calling; it’s not tutoring where it’s always going to be the same,” she said. “To mentor is to build a relationship with what you say and what you do. Once you go into that child’s life, it’s never the same. So, be sure you have that commitment and can be consistent in their lives. Be fully committed to working with that child and knowing all the obstacles they’re facing. If they didn’t have needs, there would be no need for you.”