



Yes. MAM

Memphis Athletic Ministries gives inner city youth a positive resource

by Ashley Johnston

ROZALAND AND RAVEN Wright come to the Grizzlies youth center everyday after school. They keep coming back for many reasons; basketball, volunteering to help with the younger children, and even financial management counseling. "To me, Memphis Athletic Ministries means growing my relationship with God and learning how to help out in the world," says Raven, a 17-year-old student at Hamilton High School.



With 12 youth centers placed strategically in the heart of Memphis' inner-city neighborhoods, Memphis Athletic Ministries, or MAM, has a far-reaching impact on children of all ages. The program began in 1998 as an offshoot of the Memphis Leadership Foundation in its efforts to reach urban youth and improve their lives through the principles of sportsmanship and Christianity. Today, MAM serves over 1,200 children daily through community-wide sports activities as well as academic tutoring, service projects, and Bible study.

Randy Odom, one of MAM's two Community Directors, puts the organization's mission into perspective, saying, "All kids want to be involved in something, and want to be a part of something that's bigger than themselves. Our teams provide them with an opportunity to do that and experience some peer pressure in a positive way."

For now, sports remain the biggest draw, with ongoing basketball and golf programs, indoor soccer, touch-football, dance, and even skateboarding at the Greenlaw location. Through active relationships with schools, churches, and community organizations, MAM looks to attract at-risk youth to its many sports teams. Moving forward, the child is obligated to participate in other areas with the intent of providing opportunities for personal growth.

"I started teaching ballet two years ago. I teach first- through fifth-graders, as well as a high school girl's class, and then I also teach hip-hop," says Shantell Robbins. "The goal is to impact a core group of kids that you spend a lot of time with. I do Bible studies and take my girls on field-trips."

The organization thrives on partnerships, and recently acquired four former community centers from the City of Memphis which are open everyday to adults until after school when kids arrive and MAM programming

begins. Thanks to a generous anonymous donation, they also provide transportation, bussing kids that need a ride from school and to home and conveying teams to games.

Funded entirely through the interest of area foundations and donations from individuals, churches, and partners, MAM continues to seek ways to expand. By completing the installation of computer labs in every facility last August, the organization was able to incorporate an extensive financial literacy program to the mix.

“Using software called 'Economis,' it gives kids the opportunity to have their own token bank account in a controlled environment,” says Gib Vestal, MAM's chief executive officer. “A curriculum goes along with it in which the kids learn about credit, interest, stocks, savings, and many other aspects of finance. Essentially how it came about was from a huge need in the inner city for additional financial education in all respects.”

Upon completing introductory classes on the basics, students are given a web-based account and are then compensated in what MAM has termed “Bluff City Bucks” for participation in youth center activities, and also for progress outside of the center in school, church attendance, and community service. The program stays as true to life as possible, in the form of electronic pay-stubs conveying the students' net pay with taxes and donations taken out to instill the concept of giving back to the community.

“It’s just another touch point for us to use financial literacy to teach them and give them knowledge to make good choices. It’s a way too, to help a child who might not play sports, but they can still do this and get some positive reinforcement for the really good things that they’re doing,” says Odom.

For the time being, students can earn gift cards and certificates to major retailers in various amounts, but MAM is looking to include more big ticket items. After all the effort students put in, it's hard to imagine someone more deserving of opportunities for spending.

“It addresses a fundamental community need, and yet does it in a fashion that teaches the kids in a practical, hands-on way,” says Vestal. “If we are successful in what we want to do, then we believe that our kids will look different from the normal kid coming out of this same environment. What we want to see are kids who are spiritually strong.”
