



Unity Goal

Grizzlies nonprofit counts success in friendships, not wins



Octavious Rushing, 9, prepares for a shot as kids enjoy the Grizzlies Athletic Center on Ball Road, which opened in 2003. About 62 percent of the kids in Memphis Athletic Ministries are urban.

Miraculous. "I hesitate to use that word," says Geary Hamm, a volunteer coach in the Memphis Athletic Ministries youth basketball league. "But I don't have another word really to describe it." Hamm, 42, is talking about how MAM, a faith-based, nonprofit organization, is bringing the races together in a city where they are so often separated. "My son is up here right now, as a matter of fact. He begs me every day to bring him up here ... so he can see his buddies," says Hamm, who is white, as he sits in MAM's Memphis Grizzlies Athletic Center, which is in the Alcy-Ball neighborhood in South Memphis and serves mostly African-American youth. "They're friends. They have bonded. ... We've had them to the house. Charlie (Hamm's 11-year-old son) is going to spend the night with them Friday night. It's just blossomed into what it has to be, which is relationships."

The folks behind Memphis Athletic Ministries can toss around some pretty big numbers - the 5,290 boys and girls who participated in their basketball leagues last year, the \$100,000 challenge grant they recently received from the Memphis Grizzlies Charitable Foundation. They can drop some pretty big names, too -- board members include University of Memphis basketball coach John Calipari and former Tiger and NBA player Elliot Perry.

But it's the personal stories they most like to tell, and to hear. Because the stories, for an organization that cares so little about winning and losing that basketball games are allowed to end in ties, mean victory. "Geary," MAM president Gib Vestal says after hearing Hamm's story, "is our prototype, if you will: an East Memphis volunteer who brings his own child and others here, and then helps coach and mentor some of the neighborhood kids."

MAM's mission is to improve the lives of urban, at-risk youths, while also fostering racial unity through the community. Toward that goal, there's a mix of 62 percent urban and 38 percent non-urban among the 7,600 participants in last year's programs in basketball and other sports. Games are played throughout the community, from the Grizzlies Athletic Center to the Jewish Community Center on Poplar.

"In many occasions, you have people driving from different areas of this city," says Kelvin Brown, MAM executive vice president of outreach and evangelism. "Some folks who have never gone into North Memphis. Some folks who have never gone into Frayser. So you have that, 'What am I here to expect?' Once they go into there, it's our job to set the tone." There are on-site coordinators to help set that tone. The tone, amid the competition, is civil and supportive. There's no booing, for example. And if the fourth quarter ends in a tie, well, *drive safely, everyone, we'll see you next time.*

Vestal tells the story of another volunteer coach, Kevin Cox, who surprised a suburban team at his South Memphis church, Metropolitan Baptist, by using the gym's PA system for a play-by-play "broadcast" of the game. One of the suburban moms called Vestal the next day to say it was "greater than a Grizzlies game."

The Grizzlies have been major supporters of MAM, having donated \$1.5 million to help create the Grizzlies Athletic Center, which opened in 2003. In May, the Grizzlies issued a "\$100K in 100 Days" challenge grant, matching, dollar for dollar up to \$100,000, funds raised by MAM. "We've been real impressed," said Jenny Turner Koltnow, executive director of the Grizzlies foundation, which focuses on youth initiatives. "We've had regular camps and clinics (at the Grizzlies Athletic Center). We've had coaches clinics. We've brought our players out here. There's been so many opportunities for us to continue to work together. ... It's been a great partnership."

Fund-raising for the Grizzlies challenge grant runs through Aug. 13 -- and it's one of those instances where winning matters very much to MAM officials, who will use the funds to expand four refurbished neighborhood centers. "We are very close to reaching the goal," Vestal said. "I'm confident we're going to make it."

By David Williams (dwilliams@commercialappeal.com)

MEMPHIS ATHLETIC MINISTRIES

What: Faith-based, nonprofit organization, founded in 2000, with sports programs in basketball, golf, soccer and baseball.

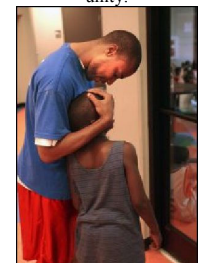
Why: MAM's mission is to improve the lives of urban, at-risk youths and foster racial unity throughout the community

Where: MAM offices are at 2107 Ball Road, site of the Memphis Grizzlies Athletic Center. Sporting events are held there and at facilities throughout the community.

To volunteer or for more information:
461-6261 or www.mamsports.org



Terrance Moore, 13, concentrates on his game. MAM involved hundreds of young people last year in basketball and other sports in venues throughout the city, with the goal to foster racial unity.



Carlos Coleman, 9, gets a friendly hello from Alphonso Saville, director of the Grizzlies Sportsplex. The team's foundation focuses on youth initiatives.