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Sports Illustrated: What a new culture can do for at-risk youth

Gib Vestal is a numbers man. As a former managing director with Morgan Keegan & Company in Memphis TN, he knows all about investing in startup ventures and reaping great gains. But the 56 year old businessman never imagined the truly significant gains God would produce when Gib merged his skills with those of others in a startup venture called Memphis Athletic Ministries (MAM). The results are far beyond the scope of any market sector profit sheet. In one year alone there were:

- 7,600 boys and girls connecting with Christ through basketball, soccer, and golf;
- 208 partnerships with other organizations were embraced;
- a 30,000 square foot gym/community center, a soccer field, and a golf course; plus five other sites were used
- MAMs was the only racially balanced sports league of significance in the community
- And they received a 95 percent positive influence rating from parents.

Gib also never dreamed that a simple profile test he'd taken years earlier, which revealed that his key ministry words were Christian, Sports and Administration, would prophesy God's plan for his Halftime. Truth is, if Gib had realized just how much fun he would have during his Halftime years, he would have said "Let the games begin!" a lot sooner.



But, like many people his age, Gib's identity intertwined with his career. So he hesitated, even though he knew MAM was the perfect ministry opportunity for him and a Halftime Summit confirmed that belief. "The Memphis Summit crystallized my thinking and made me feel more confident that MAM was the right thing to do. It represented the perfect application of a lot of talents that I had cultivated over my work career."

Still, Gib balked. "Those golden handcuffs were in place," he confessed. So God broke the lock on those golden handcuffs - with breathtaking ease, of course." I went into work one day, and a 15-year colleague came in and said, 'Gib, I've got bad news: the company is cutting staff and you're one of them.' Gib's response? "That's fantastic!" "It was God's answer to my procrastination," Gib confessed. "One day I was hanging on and the next day Morgan Keegan was paying me to leave. God was saying, 'Go ahead, Gib, take that step. I've

got something better for you.' "

In January of 2001, using the skills God had been honing in him for years, Gib began directing the administrative arm of the sports-based ministry, freeing MAM's coaches, volunteers, and staff to interact directly with at-risk young people ages 6 to 18. Today, MAM is successfully impacting both urban and suburban youth by actively enforcing sportsmanship and training coaches to be mentors and role models. In the past 12 months, no violence has marred the 3,000 games played in MAM supervised activities. MAM knows that as children commit their lives to Christ they will be more balanced in their approach to racial issues, less likely to commit crimes, more likely to enjoy academic success, and more likely to contribute positively to the Memphis community than the general population. Because of their need to experience athletics in a loving and supportive atmosphere, the 6 to 12-year-old age group receives particular emphasis. Through rapid growth in participation, MAM has demonstrated that athletics can attract children, thereby giving MAM staff, partners, and volunteers the opportunity to enhance children's lives with spiritual guidance, as well as educational and life skills training.



But MAM's influence doesn't stop there. Its positive approach of placing MAM staff at every game, actively sharing the gospel, strictly enforcing behavior standards, and scheduling participants to travel outside their traditional neighborhoods is having the desired impact on players, fans, coaches, and officials. "Through God's empowerment, we're creating a culture that changes the lives of kids and builds racial bridges in the community," Gib said. "I love those results." So do parents. One of them summarized the great gains MAM is making in the life of her daughter: "MAM provided a fabulous opportunity for my child to meet other kids who love basketball, kids she would not be likely to meet elsewhere. This has contributed to fabulous conversations in our home and her school about race, neighborhoods, and 'judging a book by its cover,' Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for providing real life experiences with people whom she might otherwise consider different. God is proud of you, your organization, and the . . . very real results that occur." Gib will be the first to tell you that letters like this one are far more gratifying than any financial bonus or applause he ever received during his market sector career. God is expanding His Kingdom right here on earth, and Gib gets to be in the game. For a numbers man, it just doesn't get any better than that.

To learn more about Memphis Athletic Ministries visit www.MAMsports.org or call 901.744.6261.