



September 3-9, 2006 | Memphis, TN

## Memphis Athletic Ministries: Impacting the City of Memphis One Game at a Time

By Laura Moore

Looking back, Kelvin Bowen credits his involvement as a young man with the outreach ministries at Idlewild Presbyterian Church with saving his life. "I grew up in Orange Mound which was a very tough and difficult situation, but I would always walk from Orange Mound way over to Union to participate in the Idlewild Recreation Program," he said. "That program provided me with so many different role models and without it, I probably would have gotten involved with gang violence and I probably would not have gone to college and received my bachelor's degree."



Years later, Bowen, who is now an Executive Vice President and co-founder of Memphis Athletic Ministries, is using what he gained from the outreach program of his youth to give back to the urban youth of the city in a large way. "I felt the need to give back to the community because I credit that particular program to saving my life as a young man coming up," he said.

Memphis Athletic Ministries is an organization that brings together over 100 local churches and schools to promote the ideals of sportsmanship and a Christian ideal of living to urban, at-risk youth in order to foster unity among diverse segments of the community. The program, which was created five years ago, currently serves over 8,000 children ages 6 to 18 in various sports programs, including basketball, soccer, and golf.

MAM President Gib Vestal, who is also a co-founder of the organization, said that becoming involved with MAM is very simple. "Simply come to one of our facilities and get involved," he said. "There's no cost." MAM currently has 6 urban neighborhood centers located throughout the city, including locations in Whitehaven, North Memphis, and the Memphis Grizzlies Athletic Center located on Ball Street.



Although no profession of faith is required to participate in the programs, Vestal said that the influence of Christian values could be beneficial in many facets of a child's life. "We believe that the modeling of the Christian approach to sports in all of its best aspects of team work and cooperation and all of those aspects that are good parts of sports can carry over into academic work and later into the work world," he said. "So that the reality is that we are changing people's lives by impacting them for Christ."

While the organization has only been in existence for half a decade, the program has already had some successes. According to Bowen, these successes include paving a positive path in life for victims of displaced persons from Hurricane Katrina in their Winchester location and lowering the crime rate in the program's main neighborhood center on Ball Street. "Crime rate was very high in that area," Bowen said. "After a year of us being there, the Memphis Police Department came to us and said that because of our existence in that area the crime rate had gone down significantly."

While Bowen said that a big part of MAM's mission is to use the messages of Christ to impact children on an individual level, he also said that a larger part of the organization's goal is to use the same messages to foster cooperation along racial lines in the city. "We tend to have a line that separates blacks and whites and even Latinos in this city," he said. "Part of our larger goal is to diversify this city through athletics so that we can all work towards a common goal to make better young men and women for the city of Memphis."

For more information about MAM, visit their website at <http://www.mamsports.org>.