

Raleigh, N.C., kids learn that winning isn't everything

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Southern Spirit staff

Learning the importance of team play and good sportsmanship is one of the main goals of the youth sports program at The Salvation Army Community Center in Raleigh, N.C.

Youth ranging from ages 5 to 13 participate in co-ed basketball, baseball, soccer, flag football and cheerleading. Since his first involvement with the programs in 1998, executive director Chris Kelley said the growth has been phenomenal.

"We now have 1,000 youth participating on an annual basis in this program. A Christ-centered atmosphere is maintained in our pre-game devotions and prayers for each sport. Children are taught that winning here is having fun, learning fundamental skills and being a part of a team where he or she makes a difference."

It's those exact teaching outcomes that Coach Hurley Raymor appreciates most about The Salvation Army youth sports program. He has been coaching tee ball with the center for 18 years and coached for 17 years prior to that in Raleigh's Little League baseball program. Hurley has since gotten to coach the children of some of the players he coached over 30 years ago in Little League.

He said he is at The Salvation Army because of his love for kids and baseball. "I have always appreciated the fact that it is not competitive and is an entry level for the little ones to learn teamwork and support one another."

One of the challenges Hurley faces each year is seeing kids come through the program who don't have the best home life. But he relishes the opportunity to make a difference. "It's kids from all walks of life being put together in a group, realizing they're on the same team. I have nothing but admiration for The Salvation Army. They do a great job. In my opinion, The Salvation Army has been an integral part of the growth of our city."

When asked about how a community center or corps could get sports programs started, Kelley said

his first piece of advice would be to pray. Next steps would be contacting local churches and businesses to see if they would be interested in starting a Christian athletic program in the community.

He also said it's important to convey to partnering churches and businesses that the sports leagues are meant to be instructional and non-competitive. One of the ways the Raleigh programs have maintained this attitude, he said, is by providing a family atmosphere with pre-game Bible devotions to share the love of Christ.

Sports programs are continually expanding, too. A summer men's league started in June that gave men ages 18 and older a chance to play basketball. The 4-year-old tee ball league that started last April had close to 100 children enrolled, and a similar 4-year-old league will be launched this month for the youth soccer program.

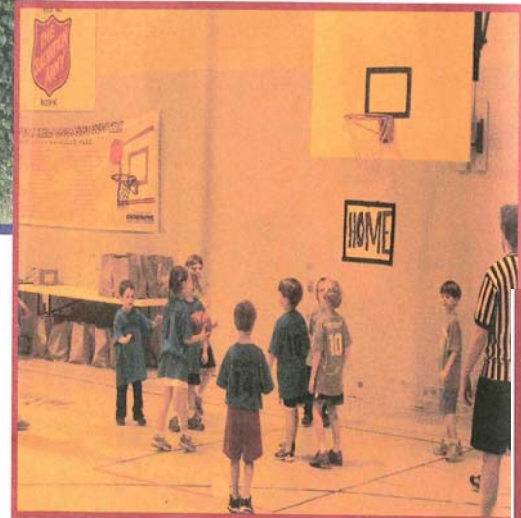
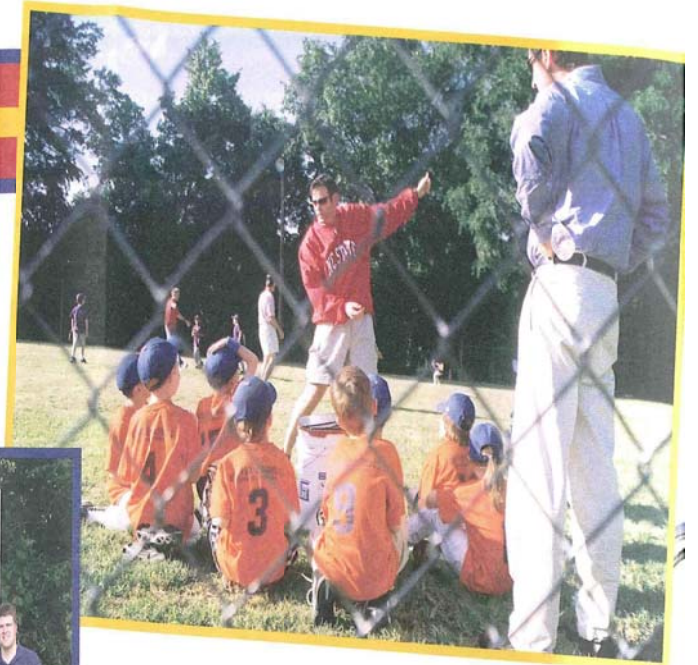
All programs will continue to be guided by pre-game devotionals, said Chris Straits, the community center athletic director. For each sport, he chooses a theme by which to share biblical truths with young people and adults. In the winter basketball league, Straits focused on 2 Timothy 3 and talked to youth about the importance of reading God's Word and of being careful about what they say.

"People just love it," said Kelley. "They love the mission of The Salvation Army and what we stand for. It really has given us the opportunity to minister to a lot of folks. People know where we stand as far as the Lord."

Top left: Chris Straits and Chris Kelley believe the pre-game devotionals and Scripture banners along the Raleigh, N.C., corps athletic fields are great ways to minister the Gospel.

Top right: The Raleigh Corps has its own soccer fields, where children as young as 4 come to learn the fundamentals of the game.

Lower right: The Salvation Army community center has a wide-ranging sports ministry program for youth, including basketball, baseball, soccer, flag football and cheerleading.



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