

School hosts youth program

LISA QUEEN

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Getting kids shooting hoops before they think of shooting guns is the goal behind a new youth basketball league in East York.

The league of Grade 6 to 8 students at Westwood Middle School was organized by the East York Strategy, a year-old project devoted to reducing youth violence.

Bethany Baptist Church Rev.

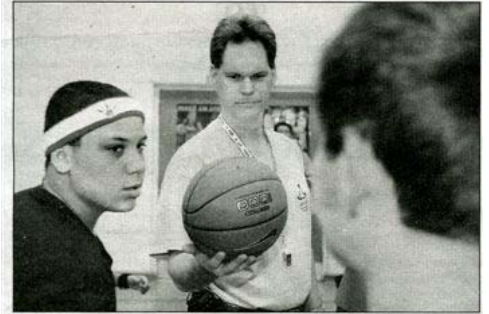
Jim Parker, who chairs the strategy, said it reaches out to young teenagers before they run into serious trouble.

"It's going really well. We have this overall plan (within the strategy) and this basketball league is a microcosm of what we're trying to do," he said.

"They're all good kids, they don't cause me any trouble. But you can read between the lines. In five years,

>>>BASKETBALL, page 3

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Mirror photo/KYLE MACPHERSON

JUMP BALL: East York Strategy Group chair, Reverend Jim Parker, tosses up the jump ball during Recreational Boys' Basketball League action recently at Westwood Middle School.

Basketball league offers alternative for local youngsters

>>>From page 1

they could be into stuff we don't want them to be into. We're trying to reach out to them and give them positive programs with adult role models."

The Carlaw Avenue school is in the area of Pape and Cosburn avenues, where a teenager was shot several times last June. That incident came a week after a shooting at a nearby restaurant.

"Pape and Cosburn is one of the key hot spots in our area," Parker said.

"It's not like it's a trouble reputation, but there are definitely things going on. We're still trying to process the violent events last June."

FOUR TEAMS

The league runs for seven weeks and features four teams of boys attending Westwood. A similar league for girls will launch in the spring.

Each Thursday night, the players take over two school gyms aided by older youths from the neighbourhood who act as referees and scorekeepers.

Guest speakers, including a police officer, a school trustee and faith and community leaders, take about 10 minutes to deliver positive messages to the youth.

Although TJ Edwards, a Grade 8 student at Westwood, can't remember details of the messages, he said the league is helping to keep him out of trouble.

"I've been involved in that kind of stuff before, hanging out with the wrong people. Just stupid stuff," he said. "It (belonging to the league)

helped me a lot. I'm not out in the community doing bad things. Now I'm doing good things. It's a good program to help you stay out of trouble."

What's more, the league is helping TJ fulfill his dream of becoming a professional basketball player.

"I joined because I like basketball. It's my favourite sport," the 13-year-old said. "As a kid and growing up, I always wanted to be a basketball player. It's my life goal."

Because TJ is a charismatic boy who other students look up to, Parker said it's even more important to get youngsters like him into positive activities.

"There are some (players) who are natural leaders. If they went the destructive, negative way, they would lead others that way as well," Parker said.

The four teams are the Milk Mart Moose (sponsored by Milk Mart), the Stanbury Stallions (sponsored by Stanbury's Pharmacy), the Tabuns Tigers (sponsored by Toronto-Danforth MPP Peter Tabuns) and the Bethany Bears (sponsored by Bethany Church).

The sponsorships allow the youth to play for free and pay for T-shirts, school permit fees and an awards banquet March 29 at the church.

Westwood principal John Chrobok said the school is pleased to host the league.

"It's a pre-emptive thing. If a kid is playing here, they're not at McDonald's or hanging out at the mall," he said.

"We're providing the kids with something to do so they're not stuck with nothing to do and sometimes making those poor decisions."

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