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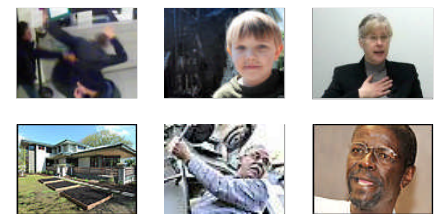
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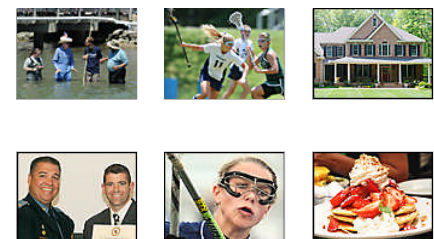
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# Baseball for Badges takes the field

## Program aims to keep at-risk kids from joining gangs

By JAKE LINGER, Staff Writer

Published 05/12/10

About 30 youth baseball players joined local dignitaries Monday inside the Boys and Girls Club at Wiley H. Bates Heritage Park in Annapolis for the launch of the 2010 Badges for Baseball program.



Shannon Lee Zirkle — The Capital

Jemarko Nguyen, 8, warms up before a Badges for Baseball game Monday at the Boys and Girls Club. About 300 children and teens will play in the program this summer, on teams coached by officers from the county Sheriff's Office. The officers also will mentor the youth in hope of steering them away from the influence of street gangs.

Badges for Baseball provides at-risk youth with the opportunity to learn positive behavior from members of law enforcement in hopes of steering the kids from street gangs.

"Gangs like to recruit in small numbers, individuals," said Reginald Broddie, head of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Annapolis and Anne Arundel County. "Oftentimes when the Sheriff's Office comes into our community, they are coming in to evict. The idea is to have young people see the Sheriff's Office of Anne Arundel County in a different light."

Badges for Baseball is a joint initiative between the Cal Ripken Sr. Foundation and the office of Maryland Attorney General Douglas F. Gansler, which awarded \$18,000 cash grants to the nine participating boys and girls clubs throughout the state.

Additionally, \$2,800 grants specifically for baseball and softball were awarded to the clubs. Through the program, 27 youth baseball players and their mentors will travel to Aberdeen for the Cal Ripken Sr. Foundation summer baseball camp.

"Sheriff (Ron) Bateman is very committed to baseball," Broddie said. "But keep in mind, baseball is simply the hook, not the be-all. We're going to teach a lot of life lessons on the field."

Badges for Baseball originated in the county and law enforcement personnel

participate by coaching and mentoring players. Bateman told the gathered crowd Monday that for two years he brainstormed with Broddie to find the most effective way to reach young people who run the risk of being recruited by gangs.

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"Gangs are not the way to go," Broddie told members of the Meade Village and Admiral Oaks baseball teams on Monday. "You're going to be involved in a lot of positive experiences, and it is our hope for this program to serve as a venue for you to become something special."

There are six neighborhoods in Annapolis and the county that are specifically being targeted by Badges for Baseball. In addition to Meade Village in Severn and Admiral Oaks in Annapolis, the focus will be placed on Bywater Mutual Homes, Harbour House and Eastport Terrace, all in Annapolis, and Freetown Village in Pasadena.

"Our greatest contribution to the kids we serve is our ability to create long-term relationships with them," Broddie said. "Once we create relationships with them, we'll see a negative turn into a positive."

Circuit Court Judge Laura Kiessling, who is on the board of directors for the Boys and Girls Clubs of Annapolis and Anne Arundel County and the Cal Ripken Sr. Foundation, said her involvement with Badges for Baseball partially originated from her desire to keep kids out of her courtroom.

"We are not going to let gangs get to you," Kiessling told some of the players Monday. "This is a great team, and you are part of our team."

Badges for Baseball is less scared straight and more playing it straight in its approach.

Kiessling - a Baltimore Orioles fan - said she knew more about football in her youth, but eventually learned more about baseball. Her knowledge of baseball aside, Kiessling's work with the Ripken family gave her an ironclad impression of its commitment to the community.

"The Ripken family is completely amazing, they are so hands-on," Kiessling said. "They could easily let someone else do the work, but Cal (Ripken Jr.) is out there, Bill is out there, and their mother is out there. They're all working to make it work. They are just some of the most hardworking people I've ever met."

House Speaker Michael E. Busch, D-Annapolis, is a sports enthusiast who coached for years at St. Mary's High School. As a lawmaker, Busch sees gang legislation proposed year after year.

"If you work hard and believe in something," Busch told the players, "there's no limit in what you can achieve. Sports has always been the greatest teacher to me.

"And if you all drink milk just like Cal Ripken does, you'll be successful," Busch joked.

The grant money will go toward upkeep of fields, acquisition of equipment and uniforms and salaries for boys and girls club employees, Broddie said.

In addition to introducing county and city youth to the game of baseball and potentially bridging gaps between the kids and law enforcement, Broddie told the players that he hopes for just one thing when the gangs come calling: "Let them know you've already been recruited."

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