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By SHAUNTINA LILLY

Contributing Writer

As the school year winds down, the time is approaching for students to swap their school supplies for summer diversions. Sports teams are sought after by many parents however there is one in particular that serves to not only provide athletic counsel but also mentoring.

“The Cleveland Bombers is a youth sports and mentoring service,” said Jackie Nichols, Cleveland Bombers CEO. “Our main goal is to help a child with their character and most children are easier to tap into through sports.”

Nichols had the epiphany to jumpstart his own sports and mentoring team after serving as assistant coach for his son’s football team. He gathered research, requested permission from

the proper channels, and was given the green light to start his team.

A year has passed since the Cleveland Bombers have emerged and they now have over 90 active youth and a retention rate of 80 percent.

The military based program is quite intense, but Nichols, a United States Air Force veteran, notes that the highly structured routines help to build the youth's character. Staff focuses on building confidence within the child to prepare them for sports, as well as communications in everyday life. When a child is first introduced to the program, one-on-one interviews are conducted to identify needs.

Parents are also met with and play an intricate role.

"It's not only for the Bombers [staff] or the child, but it's for the parents as well because we work on character," said Nichols. "One thing we figure out early is that we can't preach character to a child if the parents aren't on board. It will create a conflict of interest. We want to be a positive influence, but when they go home, the ultimate positive influence is their parents."

Nichols explained that the Bombers teach children an alternative way of thinking, reacting, and communicating despite their surroundings. In turn, he hopes that the children will go on to pursue higher education and eventually reach back into their communities.

He said the Bomber vision is to empower communities by bringing youth together, sharing the belief that they hold the power to shape how they prosper.

The sports team is comprised of three different age bracket divisions: Pee Wee (ages 11 and 12), Midget (ages 9 and 10), and Termite (ages six to eight). Bomber coaches Vicketstaff, Bridges, and Cameron oversee these groups. Various sports include football, basketball, soccer, baseball, tee ball, and also cheerleading, for girls.

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When the Bombers aren’t competing against other independent sports teams, they practice ACT/SAT test taking, and learn tools needed to succeed in high school and college. Staff visits top high schools to determine what criteria they look for in students, and then use that feedback to help prepare youth.

Community service projects are done twice monthly, movie night once a month, and church as a group at least every six weeks. A sports banquet was held last year to show appreciation to the youth. Building strong relationships with the youth is top priority for staff as they serve as father figures for 70 percent of their team.

The Cleveland Bombers currently handle all costs solely through donations and fundraising. They are working to obtain a team van and better equipment.

“Funding is pretty much always up and down because we do everything ourselves and through fundraising,” said Nichols. “There’s not a lot of people that give to independent youth organizations, especially to young African American males coming out the gate.”

Nevertheless, the Cleveland Bombers are setting their standards high and are in the works of expanding their organization as broadly as possible. In regards to his goal with the team, Nichols said, “I want this to be as big as possible. My mission is to help a child graduate college. I just want to make a difference.”

If interested in learning more about Cleveland Bombers Sports & Mentoring, email clevelandbombers@yahoo.com.