



Newsmaker Q&A

with Ted Sottong

Pickup the Ball combines help and hoops

Pickup the Ball, Inc. a Fort Myers-based nonprofit organization founded in 2012 by Ted Sottong, empowers young adults, reached through the game of pickup basketball in the Dunbar and east Fort Myers areas, to transform themselves and their communities.

Q: What inspired you to start Pickup the Ball?

When I first started watching pickup basketball games, I knew there was something special going on that needed to be fostered and supported. Not only were these young men and women doing something productive and healthy with their time - distracting them from potentially other less healthy behaviors - but they were involved in a culture that seemed to be living by a slightly different set of rules than the surrounding community; they weren't involved in what you think of urban youth being involved in. They were athletes and had bigger goals. What they lacked was the guidance and resources needed to be able to achieve those goals.

Q: What is the mission of Pickup the Ball, Inc.?

Pickup the Ball goes to the courts where young adults play to connect them with mentors, teach them life skills, and inspire them to own the transformation of their communities. We believe the community of pickup basketball keeps these young men and women connected with each other, filling voids they may



Ted Sottong

Career: Founder of Pickup the Ball Inc.

Age: 48

Birthplace: Teaneck, N.J.

Education: Bachelor's de-

gree in architecture from University of Maryland, 1989; master's in architecture from the University of Pennsylvania, 1991

otherwise have in their lives, and setting them up as potential leaders in their community. We want to start with that position of strength and equip and empower them to transform their own communities.

Q: Explain the programs offered at your organization.

We offer programs and services designed to provide information, experiences, and opportunities that may have not been possible for them to receive before. Our programs include training in life skills, employment, and support during school to maximize opportunities to proceed on to college. We support those goals with services such as transportation, resources for help with homework, applying for college, job applications, and other needs requiring computer access. Each time we can provide these services with the involvement of the community at large, there are opportunities for relationships to develop,

which lead to a better understanding of each other, and potential mentoring relationships.

Q: How many people participate in Pickup the Ball programs, what is the age range of members?

We began in June of 2015 with about seven regular members (Teammates), and as of today, 40 young men and women have signed the contract. The contract commits them to agreeing they want to improve their personal lives, their relationships and their community, and they will take steps to do make those improvements. We accept young men and women 15 and older. Most of our member are over 18. Children younger than 15 who want to be involved can start by seeking out a Teammate to mentor them.

Q: What is the greatest challenge facing your organization?

As a start-up, we are facing the same challenges any other start-up would face: funding, getting the word out, and testing out ideas and theories to see what works and what doesn't. Obviously, the recent spike in crime in the area we work in has heightened our sense of urgency, and doing enough fast enough is a major challenge. There are so many things we can do in the community, but time is our biggest enemy.

Q: How can businesses and the community get involved?

The most powerful way a person can be involved is to come and interact with

our Teammates. We need to build an understanding between our two communities to make them one. When people come in to teach them a skill, or to just help with transportation, they are impressed with these young men and women as much as I am. They just need the opportunity, and I can provide that. I would love for one or more restaurants to sponsor some dinners where I can sit with one of my teammates and a handful of people from the community to tell them more about what we do, and explore ways they can be personally involved. Every single interaction we set up has significant implications. Additionally, financial support is important as well. Some important goals I have right now are to get a 15 passenger van and some space where I can set up some computers (already donated), creating a resource center where our Teammates can go after school to do homework, apply for jobs and college, and a variety of other things. Few, if any, of our Teammates have computers at home, and to be able to offer them that resource will make a big difference in their lives. For those truly philanthropic people, I will be starting a campaign to set up a scholarship fund. Most of our Teammates want to go to college, but don't see a clear path to get there.

Visit pickuptheball.org, call 229-9870 or email info@pickuptheball.org for information.