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'Pick Up the Ball' picks up a house

Ted Sottong, a Fort Myers architect, presides over "Pick Up the Ball," a non-profit organization he founded in 2012.

The mission is to connect with at-risk, low-income males from single-parent homes, ages 16-to-24, and to provide them with resources to succeed in life, Sottong said.

"It's important to me, because when I started Pick Up the Ball, a lot of people said to me that you have to work with the middle schoolers, because that's when you have to get them," Sottong said. "But this group, 16-to-24, they're also very adjustable. They shouldn't be given up on, just because they're not

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middle schoolers."

With the help of commercial real estate broker Dan O'Berski of Trinity Commercial Group, Pick Up the Ball purchased a long-vacant, former doctor's office off Broadway in Fort Myers on Oct. 29 for \$189,000. The 3,600-square-foot office will be expanded to about 4,000 square feet and will become a boarding house for young men who are part of Sottong's mentoring program.

"Ted's been sacrificing his time and resources to these young families for quite some time," O'Berski said. "It's always been a vision of his to have more community interaction. When he started talking about this home, I thought it would be a brilliant move. As we continue to see homelessness and broken families, we tried to support him any way we could."

Sottong has raised a meager \$12,000

of a goal of \$500,000 to pay off the property and remodel it. It's a daunting task.

"That's one piece of the puzzle," Sottong said of the future home. Getting young men into the home is just part of the challenge. "How do we set them up for success?"

"A lot of them are not growing up with some essential things. Like a strong father in the house. Resources and a support structure. Especially as you transition from being a kid to an adult, it's an interesting time in a person's life. All of these changes are happening at once. To do that without a father, it's just a tough time to not have that support. We select that timing in their lives to try to be present for them. We just try to identify what that is and help mentor them and give them resources."

Sottong moved to Fort Myers from Pennsylvania in 2004. He began volunteering at Quality Life Center in Fort Myers. He gravitated to young basketball players there, realizing they bonded through the sport.

"It's intimidating at first," Sottong,

who is white, said of relating to inner-city teenagers who are Black and have cultural differences, not just racial ones. "It's easy to make assumptions about what you're seeing. For me, one of the eye-opening things was to get in the mix and realize they were great individuals. They have hopes and dreams and fears and things they wanted out of life. I really got engaged with them. They needed some things I could help address. Job things.

"A lot of it was based on pickup basketball. It's an unrecognized social service. It's getting them out of the house. I was thinking, we have to do everything we can to make sure it continues and make it even bigger. Then it got to be more about working with the kids."

Sottong reasoned small investments in his organization now could help the bigger picture of the area in the future.

"We have an opportunity to change their path," Sottong said. "We meet with 15 to 20 guys now once a week. These are guys who need some level of mentoring. They have expressed they want to be

part of something. There's some kind of gap we can fill for them.

"There might be drugs involved. I've known guys who became homeless. They're living with their mom, and their mom becomes homeless. They have all these situations that happen as they get older. That puts them further at risk.

"The boarding house is designed to first give them a stable place where they can live. They can get income. They can decide what they're going to do with that income. They can save. It's a platform. They can step up to the platform, get themselves together and use that platform to get up to the next level."

The house will be designed for 12 people with four single rooms and four double rooms and three bathrooms.

To help Sottong's cause and "Pick Up the Ball," go to GoFundMe.com and search for "Pick Up The Ball Boarding House." Or donate directly to pickuptheball.org.

Connect with this reporter: David Dorsey (Facebook), @DavidADorsey (Twitter).

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