

March 27, 2009

## March on with strength

BY DAVID CORDERO

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ST. GEORGE - The scene is not unusual. It's a bunch of kids, mostly in their late teens, shooting hoops and running through drills. There are smiles on faces, the youngsters appear to be easygoing - just a bunch of adolescent males enjoying a weeknight on the hardwood.

Pass them by and you'll miss something important.

These young men have had a difficult past. This includes drug and alcohol abuse, brushes with the law - in some cases all of the above.

What sets them apart is their burning desire to improve themselves. They were tired of being a statistic. They wanted to be somebody.

"I was just sick of that lifestyle, the drugs I was using," said Shawn McGregor, a 2007 graduate of Snow Canyon. "It's really not worth it at all."

McGregor, age 20, is among many players who will take part in March Mayhem in the Desert, a doubleheader of charity basketball games Saturday at Pine View High School. The event will begin at 10:30 a.m. when the Washington County High School Coaches face off with Tragedy Adult Services. TEAM RAW (To Educate And Motivate the Ready And Willing), the squad McGregor plays on, faces a group of local high school seniors in the second game, slated for 12:30 p.m.

Portions of the proceeds will be donated to the Children's Justice Center and Washington County School District Foundation.

TEAM RAW is made up of about 19 players, young men who have had their share of problems and have been part of the Washington County Crisis Center youth outreach program. Though remorseful, there are no visible signs of embarrassment for their past transgressions. They're beyond that. Instead of beating themselves up over what happened in the past, they came to the realization their pattern of behavior was setting them up for failure.

They needed a plan.

Making a change

McGregor didn't fit the prototype of a drug user. He was a varsity football and basketball player at Snow Canyon as a senior and signed on to play roundball at Hartnell College, a two-year school in Salinas, Calif. He never made it onto the court, though, after having surgery on a bothersome calf muscle.

Shortly thereafter, his addiction to the pain medication OxyContin began. Then he moved on to harder drugs like heroin.

Drug habits are expensive. Money eventually runs out. McGregor said one of his friends, also an addict, robbed his parent's house.

Eventually his mother got in touch with Alii Alo, better known in the community as "Bear," at the WCCC. Alo met with McGregor and helped set him on a path to recovery.

"Bear just talked about life, and how it wasn't worth using," McGregor said. "I was wasting way too much money."

Although he had a relapse a few weeks after his initial discussion with Alo, McGregor said he has been sober for nine months. He attends Dixie State and has his sights set on dentistry.

Trey Ping, who participated in last year's March Mayhem as a member of the high school all-star team and is back this year as a peer mentor, competed against McGregor in high school and said he was saddened to hear about his addiction. He wasn't surprised because he's aware of the temptations high school-aged kids face.

"I can see exactly how someone in high school ... how easy it is to get involved in something like that," said Ping, a DSC student who graduated last year from Pine View and played on the school's basketball and soccer teams. "It's sad because you know they don't need that in their lives. If they can get in the right crowd, they wouldn't make those decisions."

In Alo, who grew up on the streets of Southern California, the youngsters have someone who can relate to their problems. He also can cut through the excuses and tell the kids there is a way out, that success can happen through a different approach.

Some folks tell him he's fighting a losing battle. He begs to differ.

"A lot of people say, 'Hey, you're not going to save them,'" said Alo, 43. "I'm not trying to save them. I'm just trying to slow them down just a little bit so they can see what's going on."

McGregor's story is one of many.

Dominic Vargas traveled a similar road. The 19-year-old said he was involved with drugs and alcohol and had brushes with the law in his youth before he entered the WCCC.

"I rejected all kinds of help at first," Vargas said.

When he finally took the advice to heart, he began to thrive. Alo said he's "blown away" by the progress Vargas has made. With a goal of becoming a surgical technician, Vargas said he is set to earn his GED in June.

For 17-year-old Chris Ellis, basketball provides an outlet for his relentless energy. He said it's the only time he is allowed to leave his residence because he is on house arrest.

"It gives me something to look forward to," said Ellis, who has also participated in boxing through WCCC. "I can let out all my anger here. Before, I didn't have anything physical to do, and the stress built on me. I had no way to relieve it."

Ellis said his wake-up call came when he was in juvenile detainment. As the days marched on - he said he was there less than a week - the solitude, confinement and lack of independence wore on him. He started thinking about what happened and how he could change.

Now he has plans to become a police officer.

"It shows a lot about someone when they have the will to just stop one day," Ping said. "I have a lot of respect for these guys who have made that step in their lives."

And if temptation rears its ugly head again?

"I've come this far," said Vargas, "why would I want to go back to how things were?"

More than a game

In its second year, March Mayhem has grown. It now has a title sponsor, And1 shoe company, and several other contributors onboard including the Washington County Recreation Center.

Alo said the School of Life Foundation has been invaluable to his outreach program. Run locally by Jack Rolfe, School of Life puts out a booklet to help facilitate discussion, called "Learn to 'School' Your Toughest Opponent."

A year ago, School of Life was named charity of the month by Canyon Media and received free advertising for the month of March. The exposure, along with mentions in local print, television and radio media, helped March Mayhem earn a solid turnout in its first try. Rolfe said the event has received similar support this year.

"It went well last year so we decided to keep it going," Rolfe said. "Hopefully it will go on for years to come."

Although integral, March Mayhem is only one vehicle in which Alo and Shawn Mitchell - who provides guidance for members of Tragedy Adult Services - spread their message.

Alo takes his pupils into the community to preach the ills of crime and drug abuse, including a Wednesday trip to the juvenile detention center, often referred to as "DT." Alo said members of TEAM RAW also speak in area high schools and middle schools, something McGregor said he's looking forward to.

He's also excited to take on the high school all-stars, comprised of 13 graduating seniors from Enterprise, Hurricane, Desert Hills, Pine View, Dixie and Snow Canyon. Alo said the community can benefit from seeing the all-stars perform.

"Our boys look at them and see there is no difference," Alo said. "They play just as hard, they want it just as bad, so why can't we do that in the classroom, in our homes. That's what we're trying to teach these boys."

While they have made progress in rehabilitating once-troubled youth, their ultimate goal is to spread awareness and help prevent the problems from occurring to begin with.

"When a tragedy happens like 9/11, people who don't even know each other pull together," Mitchell said. "Why can't we do that before a tragedy happens? If we all come together, all of us combine as one, then there would be (fewer) tragic things happening."

#### Additional Facts

##### If You Go

WHAT: March Mayhem in the Desert (two charity basketball games)

WHEN: Saturday, 10:30 a.m.; 12:30 p.m.

WHERE: Pine View High School

WHO: First game pits the Washington County High School Coaches vs. Tragedy Adult Services. Second game features TEAM RAW and Washington County High School Seniors Rec-N-Crew

SUGGESTED DONATION: \$5 for adults, \$3 for children, \$10 for families

PROCEEDS BENEFIT: Children's Justice Center and Washington County School District Foundation



Team RAW's Dwayne Bright dunks that ball during a team practice at the Washington City Recreation Center Tuesday night. (Christopher Onstott / The Spectrum)



Team RAW's Shawn McGregor stands on the sideline in last year's Tragedy jersey during a pickup game at the Washington City Recreation Center Tuesday night. (Christopher Onstott / The Spectrum)