

Lending a helping hand



Campers participating in the National Youth Sports Program work on their golf swings on the A&M campus Thursday afternoon.

PHOTOGRAPH: Tim Moog

Program that helps disadvantaged youths wraps up at A&M

By MATT MITCHELL
THE BATTALION

Dr. Frank Ashley remembers the day it really hit him.

An associate dean for the Department of Education, Ashley had recently become involved in the National Youth Sports Program (NYSP), a federally funded, NCAA supervised summer sports camp designed to reach out to economically underprivileged youths, with a new branch in the Bryan-College Station area.

Unfortunately, one of his new charges had misbehaved and faced the probability of being taken home, a task that fell to Ashley.

"He'd broken the rules, and I was all set to drive him home," Ashley recounts. "But then he said to me, 'Please don't take me home, because if I go home, then my friends will make me sell drugs, and I don't want to hang out with them.'"

"When you don't see those things, you think that sort of thing doesn't go on. But when you see it actually happen, it makes you realize we're doing a pretty good thing here."

Ashley, presently the project administrator of the award-winning Texas A&M branch of the National Youth Sports Program, has spent the last nine years working on the project and has seen some inspiring results both in the national and state programs.

This summer's NYSP ended last Friday, culminating with a basketball game on the floor of G. Rollie White Coliseum and an awards ceremony that left more than a few of the staff and campers choked up.

The NYSP attracts some 67,000 participants in 152 cities across the country, most with universities or colleges to help support the program. The goal of the NYSP is to mold well-rounded youngsters by combining sports with education.

The A&M program services the communities of

Hearne, Caldwell, Calvert and Somerville, and serves over 300 campers each year. Thanks to its link to the NCAA, the NYSP has access to apparel and equipment of the highest quality.

"We call it the National Youth Sports Program, but it's also an education program," Ashley said, pointing to the seven and a half hours per week of required educational instruction. "We teach drug education, substance and alcohol abuse, career opportunities, even computer skills. The good thing about it is we can teach a lot of the classes that they can't teach in the public school system."

The camp runs in the afternoons five days a week for five weeks, with youth between the ages of 10 and 16 eligible to attend. At least 90 percent of the campers must be categorized as living below the poverty line. The kids are bussed from the surrounding communities, attend camp all afternoon, and are given a snack and dinner before being bussed home. All of this is provided free of charge to the campers.

Ashley estimates that A&M kicks in over \$100,000 per year on the camps, but emphasizes that the communities lend their help as well. A.P. Beutel Health Center and the Brazos Valley Family Health Clinic donated their time and resources to contribute free necessary physicals to the kids. Local merchants helped with prizes, and local school districts bus the campers.

Along with such popular mainstream sports as volleyball and basketball, the NYSP participants are also taught non-traditional sports like gymnastics, tennis and racquetball. An aquatics program ensures everyone learns to swim, and there's even a golf program, one of only five such programs in the nation.

Along with Dr. Ashley, activities director Dottie Dee Agnor is quick to credit her staff with making the program such a resounding success.

"I think they (the staff) all feel like it's a good, worthwhile program to be involved with," Agnor said. "It's not

the easiest job in the world because it's summer and it's camp and the kids come in sky-high all the time. I pull my hair out every day, but I'll probably miss every one of them tomorrow."

The staff has, in turn, had an equally positive impression on the kids. One might think that the campers would balk at the notion of attending what amounts to school for at least an hour every day. Not so, say 13-year-olds Tiffany Harris and Erika Williams.

"I liked it when they talked to us about drugs and suicide and stuff," Harris said. "They taught us how those things hurt us, so I thought the enrichment was helpful. It was my favorite part."

"The staff made it fun for us," Williams added. "They had rules, but they gave us choices, which let us act more like adults."

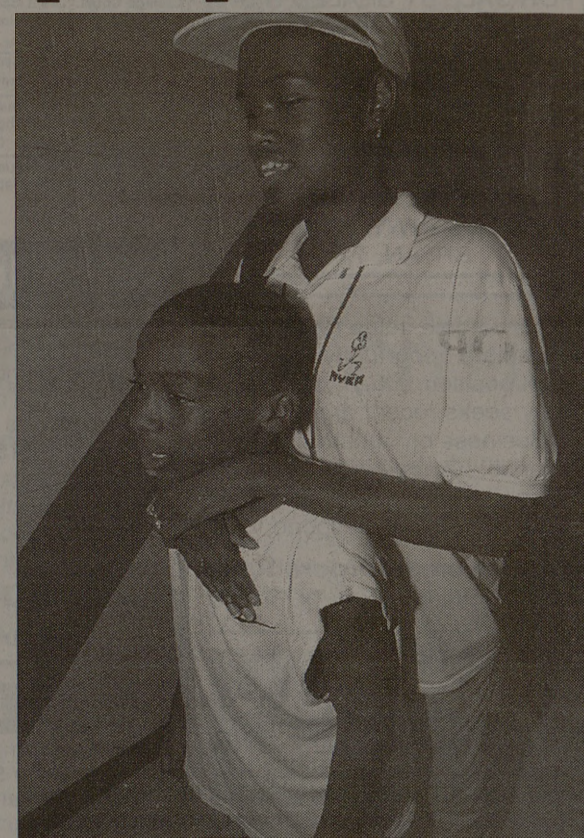
In addition to the obvious benefits of keeping the campers off the street, the NYSP gives them the opportunity to actually experience a college campus, something that is perhaps rare for many of them.

"If you give kids an opportunity to come on a university campus, it could make a big difference," Ashley said. "They realize there's nothing foreign about A&M and they think, 'maybe I could go to Texas A&M someday.' It gives them hope."

Hope is in short supply with these kids, as are many of the opportunities afforded and taken for granted by their suburban counterparts, who have the luxury of sports leagues and an abundance of instruction, as well as positive influences.

"A lot of these kids just have not had the opportunities that suburban kids have had," Agnor said. "These are not bad kids, they just haven't had the opportunity of maybe the background at home, to know how to behave appropriately."

Day by day, the National Youth Sports Program is changing that.



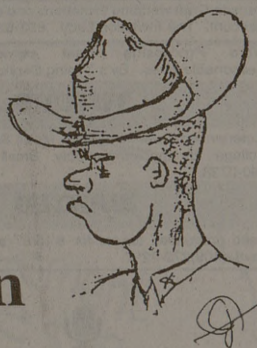
PHOTOGRAPH: Tim Moog

Keisha Henry, a psychology graduate student, hugs one of her campers.

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