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Nonprofit aims to help city youth in more ways

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More than two decades ago, a faith-based nonprofit called UrbanPromise opened a small summer camp in Camden.

Over 22 years, the ministry grew to include private K-12 schools, job training, outdoor clubs and a host of other recreational and educational programs -- all free or heavily subsidized for Camden youth.

Now, the organization is hoping to expand even more by soliciting help from South Jersey businesses.

The "Make A Promise. Keep A Promise" campaign launched last week aims to raise \$2 million in corporate sponsorship over the next three years and encourage suburban employees to volunteer in mentoring programs.

Frank Beideman, vice president of resource development for the Pennsauken-based Holman Automotive Group, is spearheading the initiative. On Thursday, he presented it to 46 auto outfitters, lawyers, construction company owners and other business leaders gathered at one of his company's car dealerships in Mount Laurel.

Beideman said he was eager to support the ministry because he's seen firsthand how it helps Camden children succeed. His family began mentoring high school students in an UrbanPromise lunch club five years ago.

"All the revenue that is generated really goes to the kids of Camden," Beideman said. "We really think that's a great cause."

About 500 children ages 5 to 18 participate in UrbanPromise programs during the school year, and more during the summer, said president Bruce Main. UrbanPromise teens graduate at twice the rate of their public school counterparts and 95 percent of them attend college, he said.

Recently, the ministry trained interns from around the world to run affiliated programs in Malawi and Honduras. UrbanPromise branches also have opened in Wilmington, Del.; Toronto and Vancouver.

"Besides the local impact, what we're trying to do is identify young entrepreneurs that have a heart for Christian youth development," Main explained. Right now, 80 percent of UrbanPromise's \$3.2 million annual budget comes from individual donations, Main said. Corporate giving made up less than 8 percent, or under \$300,000, last year, he said. Additional donations would allow them to ensure that programs that cost a lot to run, such as summer part-time jobs, can continue operating and possibly expand, he said.

Albert Vega, who oversees one of the organization's six sites throughout the city, said there are thousands more children in Camden that the ministry has yet to reach. He's praying for funding to renovate the rundown East Camden building where he supervises after-school programs, which would open up a large multipurpose room that's been off limits because of safety concerns.

On Friday, fifth-graders careened around a dim downstairs classroom, pumped up for a special pizza party. Basketballs thudding on the gym floor above added to the racket.

"Every day I get kids asking if they can come to the program but I've got to turn them down because of space or finances," Vega said.

Vega, 24, grew up along with the ministry. The North Camden native began attending UrbanPromise summer camps at age six, participated in its newly minted after-school programs and later was hired to work as a camp counselor and tutor. During high school, he took college test prep courses through the agency and went on a weeklong bus tour of 25 universities along the East Coast.

"They gave me a view that the world is a lot bigger than just Camden," he said. "It was a ministry of encouragement."

He came back to work for UrbanPromise full-time after graduating from Eastern University. Now, he said, he's the encouragement, the proof, that Camden kids can go on to attend college and get good jobs.

Beideman said he's already heard from five people interested in serving on a committee to lay out strategies for building corporate partnerships. In addition to financial contributions, Beideman said the committee will encourage local businesses to get involved with UrbanPromise in other ways, perhaps by volunteering directly or offering internships to the youth.

"Even though the economy's bad, there's a tremendous amount of kindness in this area," he said. "If we can show and convince the businesspeople in this area what UrbanPromise does with the kids in the area, I think it's a slam dunk."

Bill Emerson, co-owner of Emerson Personnel Group, a staffing and recruiting company in Cherry Hill, said Thursday's presentation hit home. He plans to join the committee.

"You don't realize what these children in Camden are going through," Emerson said. "Then you see the kids who've gone through the UrbanPromise program and how successful they are now. It was just a great story. You couldn't help but walk out of there saying, 'How can I help?'"

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Additional Facts

MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about UrbanPromise, visit www.urbanpromiseusa.org. For more information about the new campaign, call Frank Beideman at (856) 486-7127.
