

Dodgeball Mania: Community outreach making a difference

by **MATT CHANDLER**
Reporter

For Jason Proctor, youth pastor at Evangel Assembly of God, it started as an idea among his college youth ministry group.

"There are 1,600 homes within a two-mile radius of the church [1800 Maple Road] that have 11 to 17-year-old children," Proctor explained. "We wanted a way to reach out to those kids and offer them a fun, positive way to spend their summer."

With a small budget and a large vision, Proctor set out to create a summer dodgeball league at the church. The group converted a largely unused skateboard park into a dodgeball court — complete with bleachers to accommodate the fans, a concession stand, and a staging area to host guest speakers, show movies and share other entertainment.

Once the concept was in place, it was time to see if the community would embrace Evangel's vision of a dodgeball league.

"We mailed out 1,600 fliers, put up signs, and did some local advertising." As registration day approached, Proctor admits there were some nerves wondering what kind of a turnout they would have.

"We were hoping to have 50 to 100 kids sign up," Proctor said. He was shocked at the final result. "We had to turn kids away."

With final registration maxed out at 179 participants, Proctor and his team had to build a second court to house all the players, and the league was divided into two categories: junior high and high school.

Proctor said the community's response has been great.

The league offers youngsters a chance to participate in a team

event, get some good exercise, spend their summer meeting new friends and hopefully, for some, it offers the chance to earn some cash.

"The top team from each division wins \$500 at the end of the season," Proctor said. Additional money is



Zach Lorden shows off his juggling skills during a break in the action on the dodgeball court last summer. Lorden called his experience with the league "a lot of fun and a chance to get to know a bunch of great people."

awarded for Evangel's version of the hit television show, 'Fear Factor,' where kids compete in a series of stomach-turning, sometimes painful competitions.

"We had kids bobbing for apples in a fish tank of meal worms, and eating chocolate-covered fried crickets," Proctor said. Another test had them attaching clothespins to their face, with the winner being the person who could put the most on their face in two minutes.

Sound silly? Well, Proctor said it is all part of the team building, festive atmosphere he hoped to foster when the idea of the league

was being floated.

"We had 25 kids sign up to participate in Fear Factor, and we gave \$100 away to the winner.

Thirteen-year-old Blake Anthony, who traveled from Cheektowaga to participate in the league, and played in the junior high division wasn't

afraid of a few clothespins, or a mouth full of worms.

"Fear Factor was a lot of fun, especially eating the chocolate-covered hot dogs."

But the league was more than just hard-hitting action and worm-covered apples, there were guest speakers and entertainment spread throughout the season.

During halftime each week there were performances and presentations by various groups, including a hip-hop dance team from Orchard Park, as well as guest speakers delivering a number of powerful messages to the teens.

"We had people come and speak to the kids about teen pregnancy, their experiences with drugs and alcohol and other social struggles kids go through," Proctor said.

What made the presentations especially powerful was that most of the stories were being told by young adults not much older than the players on the court. "It was something to make a connection with the youth and hopefully have an impact on them," he said.

Overall, the league exceeded not only the expectations of the youth pastor, but also of the youths who participated.

Sam Pappagallo, an eighth-grade student from Amherst, was impressed with how many people showed up to play in the league.

"It was great, it was really active, and I had a lot of fun," he said.

Pappagallo said even though the turnout was high, "I think we can get even more kids to join."

Asked why he would encourage youths who were thinking about giving dodgeball a try, Pappagallo said that was easy.

"The dodgeball, the food, and last, but not least, the fun."

Proctor said he was pleased with the response from parents and the community.

"We had parents coming up every week, thanking us for putting on the program," he said.

"They saw it as a positive experience for their kids, and a place they could come, and have good, safe fun during their summer."

Rick and Donna Silvestri, whose two sons, Rick and Mike participated in the league, called the dodgeball league, "the highlight of their summer."

"They all got so much out of the program and we, as parents, appreciate the positive alternative for our teens."

Registration for the 2007 season will be held from 7-8:30 p.m. on three consecutive Wednesdays, May 23, May 30, and June 6 at Evangel Assembly of God Church, 1800 Maple Rd. Williamsville. For more information, call 688-4941, or visit their Web site www.evangel-buffalo.org, where you can download a registration form.

What's Going On

Webkinz raffle to be held at Kadimah School

A collection of rare, discontinued mint-condition Webkinz will be raffled now through May 31 at the Kadimah School, 1085 Eggert Road, Amherst. Proceeds will benefit the scholarship program. Tickets are \$10 each or three for \$25. Only 500 tickets will be sold. For more information, call 836-6903.

Ethical wills class slated at JCC

At 10:30 a.m. Tuesdays through May 29, Morton Merowitz will present a class on ethical wills containing personal and spiritual values and the insights one might want passed on to future generations at the JCC Benderson Family Building, 2640 North Forest Road, Getzville. The cost is \$15. For more information, call 688-4114, ext. 366, or e-mail astromberg@jccbuffalo.org.

Senior art to be displayed through June 4

The Senior Art Show at Sacred Heart Academy will be exhibited from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday until June 4 at the academy, 3860 Main St., Eggertsville. The exhibit is free. For more information, call 834-2101.

Watercolor society show, reception set

The Niagara Frontier Watercolor Society will exhibit its spring show through Friday, June 1 at the Market Street Art Center, 247 Market St., Lockport. Gallery hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. A reception will be held from 2 to 4 p.m. Sunday, May 20. For more information, call 478-0239.

Community band concert set at community center

The Amherst Community Band will present a memorial concert at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, May 23 at the Harlem Road Community Center, 4255 Harlem Road. Admission is \$4 for adults and \$3 for seniors and students.

On the Campus

Melissa Hauger has graduated magna cum laude from the University at Buffalo. She is the daughter of Chuck and Mary Beth Hauger of Williamsville.

Lauren Helowicz of Williamsville has graduated from Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, Ohio.

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