

CATCHING UP WITH FORMER PDS COACH AND ATHLETIC DIRECTOR KEN BENNETT

You might not think a former PDS staff member would end up on the streets, but in Ken Bennett's case, he has spent over twenty years there. Ken served as a PDS coach from 1974-1982, but now many Memphians know him as the founder and Executive Director of Streets Ministries.

Streets Ministries is a Christian outreach program that seeks to meet the needs of underprivileged youth in the Memphis inner city. Since Ken started Streets in 1987, the ministry has grown to be one of the largest programs of its kind in the Memphis area.

Yet over twenty years ago, when Ken began Streets with only a used van and a basketball, he never imagined that such a small outreach would grow to the point that it has today. In fact, he only expected Streets to be a three- or four-year gig. Little did he know what would happen.

Before Ken started Streets, he worked at PDS from 1974-1982 as a coach and then as the athletic director. After his time with PDS, he went on to earn a Master's Degree in Counseling, at which point he served as a therapist in the Alcohol and Drug Unit at the Mid South Hospital and then at Eastwood Hospital's Mental Health Unit. A few years later, Ken decided to go back to working with kids, so he joined the staff of Urban Young Life in Memphis.

While working with urban youth, Ken decided to start an outreach program with St. Patrick's Church, specifically for the kids of the Cleaborn

and Foote Homes community, not far south of what is currently the FedEx Forum. Then in 1987, with the guidance of the Memphis Leadership Foundation, this outreach matured into Streets Ministries.

Currently, Streets employs eleven full time staff, and the ministry houses its operations in a one of a kind, 34,500 square feet facility completed in 2006. With this new building, staff members conduct academic tutoring programs, host outreach events, and provide healthy gathering places for kids to hang out together.

After twenty plus years of being at Streets, Ken says he still loves working with kids: "They keep you on your toes." He enjoys the fact that they are so open to trying new things.

Of course working with young people in a ministry like Streets has its trials, but during all these years, those challenges have not pushed Ken into a different career. He explains that what has kept him from burning out is to remember that it is not up to him or his staff to transform these kids' lives. "God has not promised that we will see success; God has only promised that his word will not return void," he says. What this promise means for those at Streets is to love and serve these kids while engaging them with the Gospel. The rest is up to God.

Occasionally, Bennett and his staff do watch the lives of some kids change. "You never know the full impact or influence you have on young people," he says. Sometimes kids



will go through the Streets program without any change, and then, several years later, they will approach Ken with a desire to seek God and to turn around their lives. Witnessing these transformations is by far the most rewarding part of his job.

Though his time at PDS was relatively short, Ken can look back and see that God used his coaching days at PDS to impact boys and to build a network of people who would later partner with Streets in instrumental ways. In fact, some of his former PDS students have recently served as board members of the ministry. These opportunities would have never been possible otherwise.

No matter how long it has been since his PDS days, his coaching legacy still remains with him. Every now and then, Ken runs into a former PDS student who still greets him as "Coach."

Perhaps these former students still remember him because of his simple approach: "Kids are kids," he says, "whether from PDS or the Memphis inner city. They respond to positive interaction no matter who they are."