

Franciscan Center, FCA team on soccer camp to benefit those experiencing homelessness

TOWSON - Shaun Smithson, state director of the Maryland Fellowship of Christian Athletes, annually gathers his family to come up with one word they hope God will use to impact their lives - sort of like a New Year's resolution.

His word for 2019 was "imagine."

He then challenged his son, Sayer, to imagine his dreams for the year. Instead of scoring a big goal, Sayer said he wanted to help the homeless.

Smithson had already been brainstorming with Jeffrey Griffin, executive director of the Franciscan Center in Baltimore, on a concept for a soccer tournament to benefit those experiencing homelessness. The idea evolved into a 3-on-3 soccer clinic, with the participation fee being the donation of an article of clothing.

On July 27, about 50 young athletes from across the region gathered at Calvert Hall College High School in Towson to enjoy a day of soccer and altruism. It involved both professional players offering instruction and refugees who find an outlet in the game.

"We had several kids from a program in Baltimore City called 'Soccer Without Borders Baltimore,'" Smithson said. "They work primarily with refugee families to give the kids a chance to get out and play, learn English and get an education on the soccer field. And 3-v-3 is just a good offseason way to play. Lots of touches on the ball. Lots of movement."

Smithson recruited a couple of Baltimore Blast players, Jonatas Melo and recently-acquired Victor France, to help with the clinic. Melo said community outreach is an important part of being a professional athlete.

"I love showing the kids the love I have for the sport," Melo said. "I try to help them

get better, make them dream and develop into good players. This is for a great cause.”

Other instructors included Jacob Bender, a Calvert Hall alum who was the NCAA Division III National Player of the Year in 2016 for Messiah College.

Sayer Smithson, the inspiration for the event, had already gathered 125 coats prior to the clinic through a web-based drive. By mid-morning, that pile had grown exponentially as more families showed up for the clinic. The morning also produced 500 sandwiches, made by the campers, for those experiencing homelessness.

Griffin, who leads the Franciscan Center, a Catholic mission that provides “emergency supportive outreach” to the economically disadvantaged, was delighted that the idea had come to fruition.

“Last fall I shared this idea in a meeting with a couple of soccer organizations and then I left it alone for a couple weeks,” he said. “Thankfully, Shaun Smithson with the Maryland FCA called and told me he wanted to be a part of it. We met soon after and a partnership just naturally fell into place.

“Both of our organizations want to help our community, our city and our state. We believe God put us on earth to be of service to each other and to our neighbors who need help. Shaun and I both love soccer and believe we can use (it) as a powerful tool that can help us break down barriers and also teach service to one another.”

The Franciscan Center serves more than 1,100 children each year and even more adults. This year’s goals include using the clinic to inspire 25-50 families to assist its mission.

“The goal of FCA is to help coaches and athletes find ways to use their influence for the good of others,” Griffin said. “This is an incredible way to accomplish both.”

Mike McEwan, the athletic director at nearby Loch Raven High School, worked with Calvert Hall to secure fields for the tournament. Griffin was grateful that Calvert Hall donated the use of its new artificial turf fields, which meant more resources for helping the homeless.

“Calvert Hall has been an incredibly gracious partner,” Griffin said. “One of the largest expenses of events like this is field space so having space at Calvert Hall donated to us allows us to make sure that all donations go directly to serving families that are currently experiencing a time of homelessness or need.”

Rob Gray brought his daughters and a couple of players from Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish in Baynesville to the clinic. Gray works with the school’s CYO program. Its goals include being inclusive regardless of a family’s socio-economic status.

“If someone has a hardship, we certainly let them play,” Gray said. “We just want the girls out there playing soccer. This is fantastic. We just want to make it fun for the girls.”