

# Beyond Basketball

By Erik Engquist  
STAFF WRITER

**T**HIS MONTH, 200 adolescent boys and girls from across Brooklyn are improving their jumpshots and defense at a three-week basketball camp in Park Slope.

But when the balls are put away each afternoon, the kids are not done.

At nightly seminars, they are encouraged to avoid drugs and alcohol, further their education, stay out of gangs and become more culturally aware.

They pay nothing, and their instructors get paid the same.

Organizing the effort are Chris Johnson, 28, and other volunteers from a generation not known for giving back to the community.

It is blossoming in a community whose middle-class reputation leads many to assume that its youngsters are not at risk.

But several years ago, Johnson returned to Park Slope after college and found local kids he knew giving up their education and getting into trouble, "without any understanding of their futures and without realizing what they were doing, how destructive it was," he recalled.

So Johnson founded a youth group called Horizons, and organized a week-long basketball camp in the summer of 1992. He and a few friends enlisted donations from local businesses and persuaded guest instructors and speakers to come down to the playground behind IS 51, Fifth Avenue and Fifth Street.

Eighty-five high-school-age boys benefitted from that first basketball camp, 160 boys and girls the following summer. This year's effort, from Aug. 14 to Sept. 2, is Horizons' most ambitious yet, serving boys and girls from grades seven through 12. It follows a four-week July soccer program at the Parade Grounds, and precedes Horizons' second six-week fall drama program at John Jay High School.

Every program is free, despite the absence of government funding. Johnson, the executive director, and program director Robin Runstien are working to

## At-risk kids get sporting, life tips



establish a full-fledged youth program that will survive when they move on.

For now, the Horizons volunteers spend their spare time helping any youngster who asks. "We don't turn people away," said Runstien, a Portland, Ore., transplant living in Park Slope.

Sports helped keep Johnson out of trouble as a teenager, but he made the education seminars an integral part of Horizons because he felt today's kids needed more. "We didn't want to just roll out the balls and say 'blow off some steam' and then send the kids back into the same situation they came from," he said.

Past seminar leaders have included Norman Siegel from the American Civil Liberties Union and representatives from Planned Parenthood. Len Robertson of the Brooklyn District Attorney's office is making several anti-gang, anti-violence presentations at this year's basketball camp.

Other seminars, also held right on the outdoor courts, will address education, sexual awareness and the hazards of drugs and alcohol.

"With the seminars, we're just scratching the surface with these kids," Johnson acknowledged. But he sees results. "Some kids are thinking about issues that maybe they've never thought about before."

The program's success is reflected in people like Eon Moore, 19, a Red Hook resident who participated in the first two Horizons basketball camps. This year, he is an instructor, and he also now coaches a 14-and-under team in his neighborhood.

Jennifer Marrero, 13, has participated in Horizons sports programs but seems to have enjoyed last year's drama programs most. "Ever since then, I've wanted to be an actress," said the IS 51 student. Marrero said she'll be back for the drama workshops this fall.

To volunteer, get your kids involved or make a tax-deductible donation to Horizons, call Chris Johnson at 768-7268.

Erik Engquist is a free-lance writer.



At top, basketball instruction takes place for 200 teenagers at Horizon's basketball camp in Park Slope. Chris Johnson, left, collects vests from players after a game.

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