

Ambassadors bring message of hope

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Local law enforcement officers and local athletes will meet the Harlem Ambassadors in a basketball game tonight to benefit the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, but Wednesday the Ambassadors focused on sharing a message of hope with local students.

Ambassadors' player-coach Lade Majic said each member of her team must have not only great basketball skills, but also be drug-free — including alcohol-free — and a college graduate.

While the assemblies began with an impressive display of ball handling skills, most of the program was devoted to personal messages from the eight team members, who each shared his or her own story with the students.

"The students can identify with us. We are just like them," Majic said.

One after another, they all spoke of the many challenges they have overcome, urging the students to grow to their full potential by staying drug free, having a dream and sticking to it.

"You can expect opposition," Majic told the students. "Don't give up. Everyone of you is a powerful young man or woman. Don't let anyone take away your power."

Harold "Git-em" Williams, whose dad was a heroin addict, said the troubled background of some of the players only makes their message of success more powerful.

"A lot of people did assemblies when I was in school, but they weren't living it," Williams told the students. "I am living the dream. I've been to 24 countries and all 50 states with the Ambassadors, but it never could have happened without a 'never quit' attitude."

Dexon Williamson, who grew up in Jamaica, urged the students to value their education as a precious gift.

"What you have is a beautiful thing. People in my country would die to have what you have," Williamson said.

Yvonne Normand, with the St. Landry Parish School Board, called the program "wonderful."

"It was so real for so many of our kids. It was a real message of hope that, even if you were raised in a single-parent household, even if you were raised in poverty, you can succeed if you stay focused and stick to your goals," Normand said.

To bring home the importance of that message, she said the students, chosen from at-risk schools throughout the parish, were taken to the assemblies in buses with a full police escort.

"We do that for football teams. We wanted these students to get the same special treatment," Normand said.

As for the game, that begins at 6 p.m. tonight in the gym at Opelousas Senior High School. Susan Fisher of the St. Landry-Evangeline United Way said the proceeds will benefit the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, which currently provides a free book every month to about 2,000 local children, ages 5 and younger.

"Education is one of our top three focuses, but it affects all of them. A good education leads to better health and financial stability," said Fisher with the St. Landry-Evangeline United Way, which oversees the program locally.

The Imagination Library, which costs \$36 per year per child, helps the children start school with a good grounding in reading.



Harlem Ambassadors Coach Lade Majic introduces team members to St. Landry Parish elementary students during an assembly.

Ginger LeCompte, executive director of the St. Landry-Evangeline United Way, said the current effort is good, but there are thousands more children who could benefit if only a source of funding can be found.

She said reaching as many as possible is important.

St. Landry Parish is one of the poorest in the state. The illiteracy rate is very high and she said the school dropout rate is disturbing.

LeCompte said the free books can help turn those numbers around.

"I believe literacy starts at home and it begins at birth. It begins with a child sitting on a parent's lap," LeCompte said.

She said reading to children builds a love of reading and helps develop speech and language skills that will carry them throughout their lives.

As for the big game, Opelousas Police Detective and team coach Donald Young said his team is counting on the home field advantage.

"We are showing (the Ambassadors) some sights and treating them to our wonderful Creole cuisine. If we fill them up with enough boudin and cracklins, they may be too full to play well," Young said with a smile.

In addition to sheriff's deputies and OPD officers, including chief and former UL baseball standout Perry Gallow, Young is slipping in a few ringers.

"The Ambassadors will be competing against local heroes such as former NFL football player Kyriles Hebert, USA Gold Medal winner Walter Davis, former University of Louisiana at Lafayette basketball player Brad Boyd and others," Young said.