

Hollywood Hoop Club teaches athletic and life skills

By Charity Prater

Kids are jumping and playing. Basketballs are bouncing. Whistles and bells are ringing. These are the sounds of the Hollywood Hoop Club, an after-school girls club where students gather to enjoy the benefits of exercise, socialization, great mentoring and some added confidence.

“Physical fitness has really been put on the back burner lately,” says Missy Smith, volunteer coach of the Hollywood Hoop Club and mentor. “We combine fun and fitness here.”



Hollywood Hoop Club provides a safe, comfortable environment where young women can improve their basketball skills, make friends and prepare for the future. — Photo by Charity Prater

Sofia Sundberg, a perky fourth grader, says the Hollywood Hoop Club is one of her favorite places to play with her friends. "My favorite part is when we practice push dribbles," she says. "I'm so tired when it's over."

Every Monday and Wednesday, for an hour and a half after school, several girls between the fourth and eighth grade meet at Beaumont Middle School to play basketball.

"We work on getting the girls mentally and physically healthy and ready for high school," says Smith. "We don't only teach kids about their health. We also teach them life lessons, what to expect in high school, and we talk about real news and events."

Smith originally launched the project on the west side of Portland, where it was very successful.

"The kids didn't want it to stop," she says.

Last October, Smith launched the Hollywood Hoop Club in the east side of Portland. Girls are welcome from any team and from any school as long as they stay in good academic standing.

Many of the girls are members of other sports teams, want to meet people from other schools, or just want to improve their basketball skills.

The girls are also given a chance to create relationships with their peers from other schools and districts. Some of these relationships follow the girls as they transition from middle school to high school.

Smith was a coach for ten years at Lewis and Clark College before she took time off to have a family. When she began thinking of reentering the workforce, she envisioned a program that would emphasize physical health and life skills. She thought back to her years in school and remembered not having an opportunity to compete and train with other women. That gave her the idea of creating a place where girls could practice together in a comfortable and safe environment.

"I was so lucky when I was given a basketball scholarship," she says, "I wanted a chance to give back."

The Hollywood Hoop Club also keeps the girls busy and out of trouble.

"It's much better than the kids going home and watching television or talking on the phone all night," says Smith.

At the Club, the girls start out with a snack, followed by play, exercise and mentoring.

The club registration is \$40 per child per month, but, says Smith, "we never turn kids away who don't have the money. We have scholarship opportunities so every girl can take part."

The Club currently has 37 girls registered. The goal is to have 80. Club members are encouraged to attend on a regular basis, but Smith is flexible and encourages the girls to be involved in other sports and excel in academics.

"We like to think of ourselves as inclusive, not exclusive," she says.

Parents and coaches are encouraged to join in and volunteer. Once a month, high school girls come by to serve as mentors.

"I love coming here because the coaches are patient and help us out personally when we can't get a technique down," says Luisa Tonga, 14, a member of the Hollywood Hoop Club. "It's challenging as well," she says.

The Hollywood Hoop Club is actively recruiting more girls and would appreciate anyone, including parents, who would like to volunteer. Missy Smith can be contacted at masmith01234@yahoo.com or (503) 709-4867.