

ERNEST KINARD: THE LIFELONG COACH WHO GETS THEM ALL IN THE GAME!

Coaching eleven teams at one time and doing it well seems impossible - but when you are motivated to work with all the youth in your community and have a vision to help every youth become a "young man of distinction," it's the everyday ethic. Ernest Kinard is doing that coaching of well more than 100 youth at a time in the Seaton community in Washington, DC, at the Harry Thomas Recreation Center less than a mile from where he grew up. Most gifted athletes and stars end up far from the neighborhood where they grew up. For Ernest Kinard, who grew up close to his parents and family and went to elementary, middle, and high school within a mile of his current job, his heart is truly where home has been.

Kinard is the Site Advisor for Youth Crime Watch of the Mid-Atlantic's "Young Men of Distinction" site at the Harry Thomas Center. Moreover, he has been a Recreation Specialist and manager there or elsewhere in the DC Department of Recreation and Parks or a Security Specialist for the DC public schools for thirty years. Those who know Kinard understand that the title is just a label for a large mentoring program in which he and other men become significant figures in the lives of young men, in many cases surrogate fathers.

Born in Monroe, North Carolina, Ernest Kinard's family moved to the Washington, DC Area when he was a baby. His parents were food service workers in the DC Public Schools, and they held their jobs as crucial in providing young people with the nutrition and diet they needed and an atmosphere in which they could enjoy a meal. Ernest sometimes travelled with his parents to work, and saw how the young students loved his parents for what they did for the young ones. From that experience combined with a deep church background, inscribed in Kinard's mind is the biblical adage to let the little children come forward because they are teachable and humble.

Kinard, gifted with significant athletic talent, used that talent to become a high school all-star in track and football, a national amateur track athlete and an All-American defensive back at the American University. His diminutive stature in the world of gigantic football players brought the nickname "Peewee," still used by his closer friends. He signed as a return specialist with the Baltimore Colts, was on their taxi squad, but cut his football career short when his Mother passed away. As a youth development specialist, he believes every child should use their God-given talents. "Everybody can do something," he says, "and they just have to do it." They must value something, he says, and the role of the youth worker is to challenge, motivate, and encourage. Most of all, the youth works are teachers. He says "we teach individuals, we train animals."

Kinard's program gem is Young Men of Distinction, a large (75 this year) but tight-knit group of young men who participate in many community activities, develop life skills, and go on to successful futures under the stern but fair philosophy of the program. Kinard says that 85% of the thousands of young men who have been through the program are "respectful citizens," and only two of them have been killed due to "the streets." What happened to spur this very successful idea? As a young man, Ernest saw the women in white, some 100 of them, fill the front pews of New Macedonia Baptist Church. Some used canes, or walkers, or had other physical problems getting to church, but those handicaps did not stop them from reaching their goal - being there to worship and assist. Kinard reasoned "If these 100 women with their physical handicaps, their lack of resources, can make it here every Sunday, why can't I get young men to do it - they are at risk and they need a hand up.

After thirty years of service to youth, from 1979 when he began coaching his first softball, basketball, soccer, and track teams, to being officially hired by the District of Columbia Government June 18, 1986, Ernest Kinard's teams have won a virtual ton of trophies, but his greatest satisfaction is in where they arrived. Some of his proudest moments, though, have been when he was recognized for all that he did by the local, regional, and national authorities. In the mid-1990s he was selected as the Coordinator of the Year by the Students Mobilized Against Drugs program, a predecessor of Youth Crime Watch in the District of Columbia. Last year his group visited the White House as part of the ceremony accompanying the President's Volunteer Community Service Award.

For the Young Men of Distinction who are the center of Ernest Kinard's life, personal and professional, he is there for them because "youth are the resources" that are the key to society. But pushing that commitment is his dream for a society that is peaceful, vibrant, and hopeful. "Man without a vision is dead," he says.