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Faith: Duo turns basketball tournament into faith opportunity

Connect 3-on-3 event growing into nationwide phenomenon



Gabe Norris and Ken Thomas ASHLEY BONE / FOR THE TENNESSEAN

By ASHLEY BONE
For Williamson A.M.

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FRANKLIN — With thousands of people in attendance, live music, a food court and the Family FunZone, one might not even know that a churchwide event is taking place at the Connect 3-on-3 basketball tournament.

And that's just the way Ken Thomas and Gabe Norris like it.

Thomas, a Nolensville resident, and Norris, a Cane Ridge resident, are the brains behind Connect 3-on-3. The two say the event — now in its fifth year — is ideal because it gives church members a new way to connect with the community.

"The reason Connect 3-on-3 is a great thing for churches is because it moves them outside their walls, rather than approaching someone with a Bible in hand," Norris said. "Our goal is that Connect Ministries will cause churches to think differently about the way they reach the community. It's about creating trust relationships, to not be so concerned about inviting people to church all the time but talking to a dad while his daughter is getting her face painted, getting to know someone's name and inviting them to play basketball."

Both Thomas and Norris are members of Rolling Hills Community Church, which meets Sunday mornings at Thoroughbred Cinema.

Success spurs nonprofit

The pair's first Connect 3-on-3 tournament was a huge success that got local businesses and the church involved with the community. Word of the event spread and before long a church in Georgia contacted Rolling Hills asking for help to host their own tournament.

Norris and Thomas knew they were taking a huge leap of faith when they quit their jobs at LifeWay in September to start Connect Ministries. Operating out of a Croc shoe warehouse in Nolensville, Connect Ministries is a nonprofit organization that guides churches nationwide on curriculum and volunteer training for their own Connect 3-on-3 tournaments.

Eight cities nationwide will host Connect 3-on-3 tournaments this year, including Hendersonville, Clarksville, Birmingham, Ala., and a church in Maryland. For 2008, there are already 25 cities lined up to host their own tournaments.

"It's a massive event and takes hours and hours of planning time. We've learned from our mistakes and have a process down and a plan in place," Norris said. "Our goal is to do 100 Connect 3-on-3s in 2009."

The guides from Connect Ministries include spiritual development packets, a director's manual, marketing strategies and a visit to that city by Thomas and Norris to train members on holding the event.

Community joins in

IF YOU GO

Although a fraction of the Thoroughbred Cinema parking lot will be transformed into a basketball court with 16 goals and approximately 80 three-person teams playing, dribbling won't be the only event occurring Saturday. Starbucks will give out free drinks all day, and free ice cream will be distributed by Coldstone Creamery. A \$1,000 hotshot prize will be given to an exceptional basketball player and trophies will be presented to winners from each category consisting of men's and women's teams in different age brackets. The Chick-fil-A Family FunZone from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. will include face painting, inflatables, crafts, performances from extreme skate teams and mascots from the Titans, Predators and Chick-fil-A.

The low-pressure event struck a chord with Michael Mayhew of Thompson's Station, who played in the third annual Connect 3-on-3 and later became a Rolling Hills member.

"It was pretty amazing that so many church helpers were there, and it drew me in to help," Mayhew said, adding he'd never seen anything like that in a church. "This is something I wanted my family to be a part of. That's what got us going to church, and we became members (of Rolling Hills) eight months ago."

Jeff Simmons, pastor of Rolling Hills, said he is excited to see the two following the dreams God placed in their hearts.

"It's scary to step out in faith, but when we do God blesses us," Simmons said. "It is going to be exciting as God uses Ken and Gabe to impact many cities and communities throughout the United States for the glory of God."

Bill Pfaender, owner of the Cool Springs Chick-fil-A, has sponsored the Connect 3-on-3 tournament since the beginning. When members of Rolling Hills Community Church came to him five years ago asking his restaurant to be a sponsor, Pfaender said he had been looking for a way to get plugged into a community event.

"(It's) a nice way for families to come out and enjoy a free, fun day and not have to spend a fortune somewhere else," Pfaender said. "It's a great opportunity to give back to the community with no strings attached."

The fifth annual event begins at 8 a.m. Saturday in the parking lot of Thoroughbred Cinema. For information, visit www.connect3on3.com.

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