

## Larry McKenzie: “More than just a game”

Written by Abeni Hill, Editorial Intern  
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Larry McKenzie is the boy’s basketball coach at North Community High School, but he is more than just Xs and Os.

McKenzie is also a published author and the title of his first book is *Basketball ... More Than Just a Game*. In the book he uses basketball as a metaphor for success.

McKenzie uses the techniques in his book to help each individual member of the team personally grow as well.

“One thing I honestly believe is that if I can change their minds, I can change their lives,” said McKenzie.

“If I can get them thinking a different way about how they approach life, then we can have some different outcomes.” One of the key pieces of advice that McKenzie gives the basketball players is the power of self-image.

“You can’t be what you don’t see,” said McKenzie. “Sometimes they don’t know the value of education.” McKenzie said some of the boys he is coaching will be the first in their families to graduate high school.

McKenzie also touched on the lack of the presence of strong male role models in the teenagers’ lives. “Eighty percent of our households don’t have a male in them,” said the coach.

Although the high school students are faced with personal challenges, McKenzie emphasizes the importance of having a positive attitude. “Two important things are your attitude and your effort,” said McKenzie. “No one can make you have a bad day. You have to be in control of your destiny.”

All of the basketball players he has coached at North High have graduated high school and gone on to college, said McKenzie.

McKenzie said there is a great need for youth support in the north Minneapolis. The caring

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coach said that people too often focus on the negative aspects of the community or “the stuff that is going on out in the street.”

“Our conversations are constantly about the negative instead of the positive,” said McKenzie, referring to selling drugs and the gang activity. While McKenzie promotes the positive, he does have the team address the issues in the community.

“I tell these kids that they don’t only represent North High School, they represent this community,” said McKenzie.

“We’ll get the team together because somebody got shot on the block,” said McKenzie adding that sometimes he and the team will host candlelight vigils for the members of the community who have been slain in the streets.

Last year, said McKenzie, the team convened to discuss the Trayvon Martin case. “That could have been any one of these young men,” said McKenzie.

McKenzie said sports are positive youth activities that should be supported more. “When kids are trying to do something positive in this community we need to let them know that we support that,” said McKenzie. “We have an opportunity to be proactive versus reactive.”

The motivational coach said he would like to see higher attendance at high school sporting events.

When talking about North High athletics in general, McKenzie said “there were games where there were less than 50 fans in the stands. I went to the first football game of the year, there (were) only 25 of us.”

“Let’s not wait until the section playoff or the state tournament to get on board,” said McKenzie. “These kids need to know that we are behind them from day one.”

McKenzie said that attendance at the games is not the only way to get involved. McKenzie said there are volunteer opportunities with the Polar Pride Basketball program.

North Community High School has implemented the Polar Pride Basketball Program. This program is designed by McKenzie and the mission of the program is “to use basketball as a metaphor to empower young men to be champions in the classroom, in their families, and their communities.” The goal of the program is to inspire each member on the team to strive for excellence in all areas of life instead of just their physical ability in basketball.

“There are lots of opportunities if people want to volunteer they can give us a call and we can share with them how they can get involved in the program,” said McKenzie. The concerned coach said some of the players aren’t getting adequate nutrition before coming to school or practice.

“The value of nutrition is extremely important,” said McKenzie. The basketball coach said the

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group of people that suffer from diseases such as diabetes and high blood the most is African-Americans. “These diseases are a result of not eating correctly.”

McKenzie mentioned there are not enough adequate basketballs for the team to practice. “Whether it is equipment or meals. This school can use a lot of support.”

McKenzie also mentioned that the team has set study hours to do homework. He also said volunteers who want to tutor are welcome as well.