



*For almost 40 years the Southern Growth Policies Board has informed public policy by framing issues, contributing new information, and raising questions that need thought and answers. In a new series of commentaries we hope to get people thinking.*

## ***Basketball is Our Magnet: What's Yours?***

*by Bill Ivey, Partner & Director of Business Development, TechKnowledge Birmingham*

***July 2010***

I have grown weary of the American business refrain: “We can’t find and keep good entry-level employees.” I’m frustrated enough to have started blogging about the issue at [www.untappedhumancapital.com](http://www.untappedhumancapital.com). Our business leaders must commit to reach out to and train the unemployed and underemployed. We’re missing out on a huge group of folks who could bring serious problem-solving skills into the workforce.

Although I’ve worked in the information technology training business for the past ten years, I consider myself a life-long educator (25 years as a teacher and basketball coach). My experience with parents, students and athletes ranged from the richest to the poorest. My wife and I also raised a basketball player who is now an assistant college coach. Through the years, David and I met many young guys who seemed destined to fail as adults. Their lives were wrapped up in basketball and it seemed that there was no one available to help them use the sport as a launching pad.

In 2003, I founded a non-profit, the Central Alabama Youth Foundation. Our goal was to use basketball as a magnet to attract young urban adult males who had “slipped through the cracks.” Our Underground Basketball program opened in January 2004. I’d put the word out to some young guys I knew, and by the third week, 18 players showed up. We’ve had a good base of 12-20 participants ever since.

From the start, we made it clear to our participants that our program was not just another place to play. We explained that, for us, basketball was a means to an end—not an end in itself. This has been the foundation of our program: “Now that we’ve got you, what are we going to do?” We lose quite a few after they check us out because they are simply not buying what we’re selling; they just want a place to play.

*“Our business leaders must commit to reach out to and train the unemployed and underemployed.”*

We build relationships with our participants through the Underground Basketball program, which is held year-round one night per week. The competition quickly exposes their talents and temperaments and, by learning each participant's story, we can work with them to build an individual solution.

Here is a sampler of CAYF success stories:

- Nate: College dropout; working at a local warehouse. Super-talented basketball player. We connected him with Anderson University in South Carolina. He played three years, graduated, and is now working for Verizon in Huntsville.
- Rod: College dropout; working as a cashier at the airport. Super-talented basketball player. We connected him with Roane State Community College in Tennessee. Rod eventually graduated from McKendree College in Illinois. He now lives in Nashville and is pursuing a basketball coaching career.
- Charles: Great high school basketball player. Not recruited out of high school. Found us after four years of "wandering." Is now playing for a community college in California and will sign with a four-year school next spring.
- J.R.: Has been involved with us for six years. We helped ease him out of a blue-collar work environment into internships with two IT companies. We're now working to help him make a career move into banking or a similar industry. He's now a member of our board of directors.
- Charlton: Started playing with us during the spring of his senior year in high school. Didn't seem to need us; was already college-bound. However, he came home and played with us during Christmas and summers. Graduated *cum laude* from Tennessee State. I got him an interview with the top IT consulting firm in Birmingham; they absolutely loved him. He's been with them over a year now. Will be a leader in Birmingham for a long time. He's now a member of our board of directors.
- Daniel: College "stop-out." Great athlete, but we discovered that he has extraordinary database skills. Is currently a database apprentice for our company, [TechKnowledge Birmingham](#), but will be hired fulltime soon. He's also a member of our board of directors.
- Maurice: Has been in our program for a while. Enrolled at a local community college; makes outstanding grades while working fulltime. Recently hired by the local water works board, which could be a permanent career move for him.

"... this isn't just about social responsibility; it is incredibly pragmatic."

How is it done? First, we get to know each participant well; we "extract" their stories from them slowly but surely. Every story is completely different from the others. We get copies of their transcripts. We develop individual improvement plans that include responsibilities on their part and ours. If any participant refuses to be held accountable, they are not allowed to stay with us. We "market" the players who are academically and athletically qualified for basketball scholarships. For the others: mentorships, employment leads/connections, lots of informal counseling, and internships.

Our model is successful. Basketball makes it easy to attract our target audience. However, your magnet could be music, dance, baseball—or anything you're passionate about. What can you do to help?

Business leaders, this isn't just about social responsibility; it is incredibly pragmatic. What will you do?

---

Southern Growth Policies Board is a non-partisan public policy think tank based in Research Triangle Park, N.C. dedicated to strengthening the South's economy and creating the highest possible quality of life. Formed by the region's governors in 1971, Southern Growth conducts research and provides a forum for policy deliberation and collaboration among elected officials, citizens and leaders from business, academia, and economic and community development. Southern Growth works in the areas of technology and innovation, globalization, workforce development, community development, civic engagement and leadership.