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## City youths 'take charge' of basketball, life skills at BHS

By **WARD LUCAS** For the Blade-News

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Ahh! Summer camp. For kids, it's a diversion from the monotony of school. For parents, it's a costly, but effective, way to ensure children stay out of mischief while the adults are at work. But for incoming Bowie High freshman Milan Durant, this summer at the Take Charge Basketball & Life Skills Camp was more than a diversion ... it was a life-changing experience.

Durant, along with 127 boys and girls from the Bowie area, learned how to perfect their jump shot as well as set goals in life. In addition to the fundamentals of basketball, the weeklong program exposed the youths to topics concerning cultural awareness, nutrition and entrepreneurship.

The Basketball & Life Skills Camp was born out of the Take Charge Juvenile Diversion Program, a nonprofit behavioral modification and family services program geared to improving the lives of at-risk youth. The 17-year-old program services primarily Prince George's County youth and collaborates with the county executive, school system and private organizations that all have a vested interest in curbing juvenile crime.

In its third year, the Take Charge Basketball & Life Skills Camp was created as an athletic outlet for troubled youth. Traditionally, the camp is held in Forestville. However, Bowie resident, camp director and former Terp at University of Maryland, College Park, Jerrod Mustaf, felt a need to bring this particular aspect of the Take Charge Program home to Bowie, as well.

"There's an increase in juvenile crime in Bowie," said Mustaf. "We've neglected Bowie, as one of those places that doesn't need help."

Mustaf attributes the increase in crime to the growth of Bowie's neighborhoods and he decided to be proactive by bringing the Basketball & Life Skills Camp to his community.

Why combine basketball with life skills? "It's more about developing the entire person," said Mustaf. "This is not a jock camp." The basketball portion of the camp will teach discipline, responsibility, accountability and teamwork which are all applicable to every aspect of life. The life skills portion of the program teaches the campers how to act responsibly and how to survive in the most important game - life.

Mustaf stresses the importance of getting to know all of the kids in the camp. However, many of the children who participated in the Bowie camp know Mustaf from his work with Bowie Boys and Girls Club, where his kids participate.

A former collegiate and professional basketball standout, Mustaf also has quite a bit of influence in the community and networks with community leaders and athletes to make the camp a rewarding and life-transforming experience. "I believe in the village concept," Mustaf said. He refers to the African proverb, "It takes a whole village to raise a child," which has been one of the guiding principles of the Take Charge Program.

Mustaf enlisted the help of Bowie City Councilman and Bowie mayoral hopeful, D. Michael Lyles, who spoke to the kids about academics and resisting peer pressure. Prince George's County Councilwoman Ingrid Turner encouraged campers not to let anyone tell them they cannot do or be something.

A highlight of the program was a presentation from Nikki Teasley, guard for the

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Washington Mystics, who shared her personal experiences and taught the kids about goal setting and ruling out distractions in life.

To ensure the success of the camp, former student-athletes, current collegiate athletes, parents and educators help with the camp initiatives. Todd Mitchell, a social studies teacher at Suitland High, serves as a facilitator for the overall Take Charge Program. Mitchell came to the Bowie camp to teach the kids how to make good decisions.

"The family that plays together stays together" must be the Mustaf family motto. Mustaf's mother, a daughter and two sons were present at the Bowie camp as administrator, counselor and camp participants, respectively. His daughter, a Bowie High School student, and her friends served as camp counselors.

"I want to give (my kids) a chance to see basketball from the sidelines ... give them a chance to help lead the younger kids," said Mustaf.

The Take Charge Basketball & Life Skills Camp is intended to be a meaningful experience for camp participants, but appears to be so much more. Where else can you learn to do a lay-up, solve problems and meet politicians and professional athletes? The program is expected to be back in the village - or city of Bowie - next summer.

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