

Operation Impact aims to teach leadership skills to rising freshmen

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Index-Journal staff writer

During the next six weeks, 35 Westview Middle School students will learn some valuable skills designed to help them be successful leaders in high school and far beyond.

Those lessons will come courtesy of Operation Impact, a new program being offered at Emerald High School. Organized and being operated by Emerald students, the program will take place over the course of six Saturday encampments running from noon until 3 p.m. The goal of the program is to teach eighth-graders leadership skills, methods for handling difficult situations and ways to combat peer pressure.

"Eighth grade is a huge transitional time," said Emerald senior Shun Griffin, who founded the program. "By starting with an eighth-grade group, we can have students who are more concerned and advanced by the time they reach ninth-grade. Then, by the time they're in 12th grade, they can say they have leadership down to the core."

Griffin is a teen leader himself as Emerald's student body president and as governor of Palmetto Boys' State. He came up with the concept for Operation Impact after attending a program at Fur-

man University, where leaders from across the state challenged young people to go back home and get involved with a service project. Griffin said he decided he could have the greatest impact on his community by organizing a service project that would involve other young people, who could in turn continue making a difference long into the future.

"I pictured utilizing all the middle schools, but that would have been a huge undertaking for the first year," Griffin said. Instead, he decided to test the program on one school. If the program is successful, which he anticipates it will be, it can be expanded in coming years. Though Griffin is a senior and will be moving on to college in the fall, he said he hopes next year's student body president will continue the project and Griffin hopes to remain involved.

Griffin said he would like to see the program spread into other districts and counties as well, and hopes that can be accomplished by sharing his ideas with other members of Palmetto Boys' State.

The first encampment is Saturday, and will include an introduction to the program and viewing of the movie "Coach Carter," about a basketball coach who benched his entire undefeated team for poor academic performance. It is intended to teach about empower-

ment and defeating odds, Griffin said.

Popcorn and drinks will be offered during the movie and the viewing will be followed by a group discussion to see what message students picked up from the movie. Each program will wrap up with a physical challenge activity. This Saturday's activity will be dodgeball.

Griffin said a movie was selected for the first encampment, but other encampments might feature motivational activities or other inspirational programs. All, however, will be focused on leadership.

The program will be led by

Griffin, faculty adviser Lt. Col. Bernard Taylor, who is Emerald's Air Force JROTC instructor, and a group of student volunteers.

The high school volunteers also learn leadership skills from the program through managing the students and creating lesson plans for each encampment.

"This can be the start of a new generation," Griffin said optimistically. "We want to start high and end higher."

Though enrollment for the program is officially closed, Griffin said no student who truly wants to take part will be turned away. For information, call Emerald High School at 941-5730.