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## ***A.P.P.L.E.: At-risk Programs Promoting Leisure Education in North Miami, Florida<sup>1</sup>***

*Presenter:*

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### **Background**

According to the 1990 Census, few communities in the United States have changed their demographic profile in the past decade as much as North Miami. In 1980 less than 13% of the city of North Miami's population (42,554) was under 15 years of age. By 1990, the population had grown to 50,000, and the 15 and under population was now 20%. In addition, since 1980, the African-American population has grown 377% primarily as a result of the migration of Caribbean peoples to Dade County and specifically to the North Miami area.

This rapid increase in the number of youth and the expansion of diversity has had a major impact on leisure programming. Established recreation programs which were developed when the community was almost entirely white and middle class suddenly became irrelevant as they failed to meet the needs of newly arrived residents from other countries. This alienation was felt particularly by teenagers and other at-risk youth, some of whom even under ideal conditions may experience self-doubt and low self-esteem.

Due to population increases, the four central-city neighborhoods now contain the majority of city residents. Major characteristics of these neighborhoods are:

- a declining median age which is attributable to death or departure of older residents and to the migration of younger residents;
- greater racial and ethnic diversity due to expanding numbers of African-American and Caribbean peoples, and Cuban and Central/South American Hispanics; and
- lower per capita household income due not only to people being employed mainly in low-pay service and labor jobs but also to the fact that there are more people per household.

The idea of community organized recreation programming is alien to most foreign-born youth, especially Haitian children. In Haiti, sports and recreation opportunities are organized by churches, schools, and private clubs. In Haiti there are no park and recreation departments, so many children are not aware that the city of North Miami has a Parks and Recreation Department which offers them recreational and cultural activities. Further, anything associated with a governmental agency, no matter how innocuous, is viewed with suspicion. Children in North Miami are desperate for a place to play and they need someone to teach them not only about sports, but also American culture.

The majority of Parks and Recreational facilities are located in historic population centers that are distant from the growth neighborhoods. Many of

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<sup>1</sup> Material is taken edited by Witt, P.A., & Crompton, J.L. (Eds.). (1996). *Recreation programs that work for at-risk youth: The challenge of shaping the future*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing, Inc.

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these facilities were designed for different users with traditional “American” interests. Shifts in programming are inhibited by the existing design of facilities. Many youth athletic facilities are located far from emerging population centers. In addition, recreation centers that formerly focused on older adults will have to shift their focus to younger children, youth, and families.

## Program Description

### Rationale

In 1992 a pilot after-school program for teenagers funded by the city council was developed in the central business district. Since then, a number of additional free leisure activity programs for youth ages 8-15 years have been financially supported by the city. The overall program is entitled “At-risk Programs Promoting Leisure Education” or “A.P.P.L.E.”

The central area is one of the major business districts of the city as well as the location of a middle and high school. When school recessed in the afternoon, teenage students swarmed into thoroughfares, businesses, and shops to hang out, wait for rides, and visit. The area does not have a recreation center or an available park site for young people to utilize immediately after school, so businesses, convenience stores, the public library, and street corners were the preferred sites for teenage group gatherings. As a result, businesses were disrupted and many citizens were afraid to go into the area.

A.P.P.L.E was an effort to diffuse the situation. The success of the pilot program was instrumental in the expansion of after-school activity programs at all five elementary schools, and the development of the North Miami Middle School mentor program, the citywide Golden A.P.P.L.E. Reward Program, and the Recreation Police Leader Program.

### Objectives

- (1) to provide North Miami’s youth with positive alternatives to hanging out on city streets, in city businesses, and on vacant school grounds, by offering structured leisure programs that provide positive role models with whom students can relate;
- (2) to develop collaborative efforts between the city’s public agencies which provide support and leadership to youth; and

- (3) to offer leisure programs that will contribute to reducing youth crime and antisocial behavior.

### Key Players

The A.P.P.L.E. programs are a joint effort between the city of North Miami City Council, the city’s Parks and Recreation and police departments, and the Dade County School District. The funding required to support the A.P.P.L.E. program is shown in Exhibit 13A, page 146.

### Program Content

**Pilot Middle After-school A.P.P.L.E. Program:** Funded by the Parks and Recreation Department, the middle-school pilot program began in 1992 and consisted of intramural sports, guest appearances by sports figures, general games, modeling, art, and other lifetime activities, all of which were free to participants. Program planning was undertaken by representatives from the Parks and Recreation Department, the police department, and middle school administration. The program was led by strong, personable, “professional” recreation leaders and police officers. Opportunity for casual conversation and interaction with leaders by the students was built into the program structure. A former Miami Dolphin football player was hired to direct daily activities which added a considerable amount of credibility to the program in the minds of the participants. After one month of activity, the Middle After-school Program was described by all officials involved as a tremendous success and plans were made to expand the program.

**Elementary After-school A.P.P.L.E. Program:** In 1993 the success of the middle-school program led to the development of elementary-school programs designed to address the problem of vacant school yards and the high number of latchkey children. A free after-school pilot program for fifth and sixth grade students was established at the two largest elementary schools. The program format centered around intraschool athletic competition that encouraged fellowship, social interaction, and cooperation. The programs were organized through meetings held with principals and physical education teachers at the respective schools and the recreation program staff. The program’s success was instrumental in securing additional funding in 1994 to expand into the other three city elementary schools and to grades three and four.

**Exhibit 13A****North Miami Budget For A.P.P.L.E. (1993-1994)**

A.	A.P.P.L.E. Program Coordinator (ten months)		\$17,538
B.	Middle After-school A.P.P.L.E. Program (one site)		
	Salaries	\$10,460	
	Supplies	1,026	
	Special Events	1,560	
			13,046
C.	Elementary After-school A.P.P.L.E. Program (five sites)		
	Salaries	\$59,047	
	Supplies	6,460	
	Uniforms	349	
			65,856
D.	Mentor Program Awards		1,500
E.	Golden A.P.P.L.E. Program (five sites)		
	Salaries	\$2,532	
	Buses	6,250	
	Supplies	1,500	
	Special Events	11,250	
			21,532
F.	Recreation Police Program		
	Salaries (two officers)	\$58,816	
	Equipment and Vehicles	10,418	
			<u>69,234</u>
	Total Cost:		\$188,706

**North Miami Middle-school Mentor Program:**

In 1993 the city and the North Miami Middle School established a mentor program. Middle-school students are paired with city employees, who volunteer a few hours each week, to help students develop self-esteem and a knowledge of the working world.

Mentors work with the same student for an entire school year. On two-hour field trips, mentors and students go together to local areas of interest, such as Greenwich Film Studios; the Miami Dolphins training camp; other professional sports facilities; local radio, television and recording studios; and local universities. While the field trips themselves are interesting, the time spent traveling to and from the activity provides a valuable opportunity for mentor and youth to communicate.

The majority of time spent between mentor and youth is one-on-one. The mentors provide a resource for the young people in a nonconfrontational,

objective setting. Early meetings between participants usually are filled with questions, but as time goes by confidence and understanding replace fear and uncertainty.

A program such as this will succeed only if top management makes a commitment to allow employees time to participate. Most of the youth come from homes with one parent, or are living with a grandparent or relative. They are good kids, but they are prone to influences from the streets and are in need of guidance and a friendly ear. By helping these children at this critical time in their lives, the employees can make a difference.

**Golden A.P.P.L.E. Program:** In January 1995 the city launched the Golden A.P.P.L.E. Program in all five elementary schools. The program is designed to provide tangible rewards to students for excellence in behavior and leadership. Students are given the opportunity to participate in free special events such as trips to professional sports games, ice skating,

miniature golf, zoo trips, airboat rides, musical productions, and nature trips. Selection criteria for participation in the Golden A.P.P.L.E. Program is based on positive student attitudes demonstrated by being helpful, considerate, and polite in relationships with others. The school administrators in each individual school select six students each week to participate in the weekly field trip. The selection procedure is determined by the individual school. Selection of children whose families do not have the resources to attend local attractions is particularly encouraged. Recreation staff and school teachers chaperone the activities.

**Recreation Police Leader Program:** In 1994 the City received a police-hiring supplement grant from the U.S. Department of Justice. The money was used to fund additional police officers, two of whom are known as Recreation Police Leaders (RPLs). Officers are assigned to specific sectors of the city with the general mandate to reduce crime and antisocial behavior. The grant application was developed by recreation staff and resulted from meetings between the police, parks and recreation, and planning departments. The application plan stressed interdepartmental cooperation in combating crime and antisocial behavior in the city's parks.

Two police officers, one assigned to the east side of the city and one assigned to the west side, patrol park and school playgrounds in comfortable workout clothing, with a police department staff shirt, badge, and firearm. The officers engage in interactive recreation activities with teenagers such as basketball, softball, shooting pool, or Ping-Pong. They function as planners, organizers, and facilitators drawing in teens to active and passive activities at the recreation sites. The RPLs work closely with recreation staff already in place at the parks to curb antisocial and criminal behavior within the parks and a quarter-mile radius around the parks. RPLs also function as resources for teens who need referrals to social services to deal with abusive parents, teen pregnancy, and health and school problems.

RPLs have helped alleviate the level of physical and verbal abuse directed at recreation employees. The RPLs are used to supplement and assist in enforcing the rules recreation staff are obliged to enforce for the safety of all park patrons. Since recreation staff at the parks are virtually defenseless when a crime occurs, they must call the police. By the time the police arrive, the perpetrators are usually gone, because they realize that it takes time for staff to get to a telephone and have the police respond.

The program allows the RPLs to perform low-profile police work in a relaxed setting, thus enabling officers to relate to teens more as a big brother or friend than as a formal police authority. Recreation

personnel and the RPLs assist each other in sharing information and intelligence about teens at-risk and in trouble, or about known or rumored criminal activity occurring in and around park facilities. Information is gathered through informal and formal networks. Conversely, if habitual teen offenders come to a recreation facility, they will be more easily identified. RPLs also visit the parents of teens who are trouble in the facility to discuss behavior management.

The final strategic objective of the RPL program is to supply tangible incentives for positive constructive behaviors exhibited in the parks and the community. Rewards are given for the number of hours a teen helps around the park facility, and intangibles such as a better attitude toward staff, quitting smoking, or not carrying a weapon. Rewards are graduated and include fast-food vouchers, movie passes, Miami Heat tickets, clothes, and basketball shoes.

### Marketing

The Parks and Recreation Department distributes seasonal program books by mail to all city residents. Brochures are also available at all park facilities, local businesses, and offices. Individual activity flyers outlining program details are distributed in local schools. The city's public relations firm has successfully promoted celebrity appearances, interagency cooperation, and special events on television, radio, and in print.

A Recreation Needs Assessment Study identified that communication barriers are an inhibitor to the program's success. While the city uses traditional methods of program publicity, the community's cultural diversity means that established methods of communication are not effective in communicating with all citizens. In some cases the new populations have language difficulties. In other cases, the study's respondents indicated a distrust and dislike of "government" propaganda. Therefore, successful promotion of the city's A.P.P.L.E. programs has relied heavily on personal contact by the recreation staff, school officials, and satisfied youngsters who have discovered the benefits of positive leisure activity and tell their peers about it.

### Measurement of Program Outcomes

For the middle-school program, 20-75 students participate daily and 200-300 students over the academic year are exposed to a variety of recreational experiences such as free swimming lessons, bowling, trips to the University of Miami basketball games, intercity flag football games, and free Karate lessons.

The program has dramatically reduced the number of police problems around the middle school and the number of police calls to nearby businesses. In the adjacent city park, gang activity, vandalism, and fights between students have been similarly substantially reduced. By providing positive role models, there are constant reminders and reinforcement of the value of staying off drugs, away from gangs, and developing confidence and self-esteem.

Since school budget cuts have eliminated physical education programs and after-school athletic programs, the Elementary After-school A.P.P.L.E. Program supplies latchkey students with a place to go after school. Three hundred students have a supervised playground staffed by teachers whom they know and respect, greatly reducing gang and vandalism problems on the school sites immediately after school. One principal summarized the positive outcomes of the program by explaining that she had several students who completely reversed poor academic and behavioral problems. The principal attributed the reversal to positive reinforcement generated by the athletic programs conducted by her staff who have been hired as recreation department employees.

The North Miami Mentor Program has resulted in a number of the students making personal and academic adjustments that could be measured in demonstrated achievements such as: improved decision-making and conflict-resolution skills, increased career awareness, self-esteem, and goal-setting skills.