



Lisa W. Cumming Photography

Michael Bennett

# The **Y** Community

By Greg Lilly, Editor

A goal of Michael Bennett, the new Executive Director at the R.F. Wilkinson YMCA, is to bring a sense of community to the people who interact with the Y. Many know the Y as a great place to exercise and learn healthy habits, but Michael advocates the Y as a robust community that extends beyond the gym and pool.

Michael majored in Sport Management at Elon College then earned his Masters Degree at Appalachian State University. "I was fortunate enough become the Intramural Recreation Director at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, Tennessee," he says.

From there, he moved across town to technology corpora-

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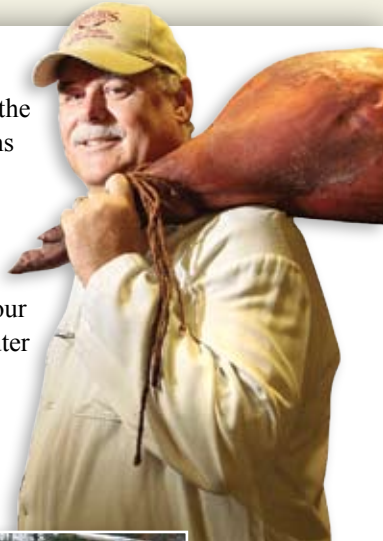
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tion Texas Instruments. When Siemens purchased Texas Instruments, many employees were laid-off, including Michael.

“The outplacement consultant said that this was the time to go after the job we could never afford to leave our present job for – that dream job,” Michael explains. “I remember doing a research paper in college on the YMCA. I remembered the old railroad YMCA in my hometown of Crewe, Virginia. That community feel that the railroad guys had with the Y always stuck in my mind. I applied for a ton of jobs with the different branches of YMCAs and landed one in Charlotte, North Carolina.”

That college research paper Michael wrote revealed a distinct difference

**“We do a lot of things, much more that just swim and gym. We’re a non-profit organization that started out as a volunteer organization. We’re here to help the community in everything we do.” - Michael Bennett**

in sports centers. While many gyms had a wide variety of options for physical activity, the YMCA was a non-profit organization focused on more than the physical. “When I did the research project, I had never had the opportunity to join a Y,” Michael admits. But when he visited a branch, he sensed the difference. “There was something about the feel,” he says, “the staff’s commitment, the community created around the Y. When I walked into that first Y, I felt that community. They had Child Watch, a fitness center, a pool; there was interaction, buzz and energy.”

Michael’s hometown is a small farming and railroad community on Route 460 and is home to about 2,500 people. “I had a sense of community growing up there,” he says, “anchored by a solid faith, family and friends.” That small community feel of Crewe - how neighbors, friends and relatives helped take care of him as he grew up - stuck with him. “I guess it was a natural fit coming to the YMCA. I feel the same way at the Y even today.”

Along with the goal of building a community-based organization to involve everyone in the area, Michael has a personal goal to get to know local civic organizations, businesses and small communities where the Y can join forces with them and help make a bigger impact. “No need to reinvent the wheel,” he says of avoiding replication of services. “Networking is important with us being a non-profit organization. We need things and we can offer things. Whether it’s taking children shopping for school clothes, helping another organization with a coat drive, or anything like that, where we can dig deeper as opposed to just surface benefits, that’s what the Y can do in the community and that’s my passion.”

The YMCA will continue to be a place to build communities. “Whether you’re a single parent, divorced, widowed, married, young adult, older adult, have young children or teenagers,” he lists, “we have a place where you can come and feel relaxed and build relationships. Some people like to garden, some workout, some run marathons. An older adult group here likes to get together for lunch after their aqua-fitness class. That’s an example of a sense of community that we want to keep building.”

The programs and activities at the Y span the whole spectrum of age group interests and needs. “People perceive us as a swim and gym,” Mi-

chael explains. "That healthy living aspect is important for the Y." The R.F. Wilkinson YMCA has a lap pool for exercise, a family pool for swim lessons and play, a large fitness center with free weights, weight machines, cardiovascular equipment and group exercise classes. "As a community resource," Michael adds, "we also have programs to assist our members." The Child Watch program is popular. "Parents can drop off their children, and we have group activities for them, things to keep them active while they stay with us."

After-school programs provide activities for children until their parents pick them up on the way home from work. "We involve the kids in sound programming like arts and crafts, humanities, physical activity and homework," Michael says. "And another childcare option is our preschool location in Colonial Williamsburg."

Michael states the Y's sports programs work in conjunction with the area Parks and Recreation departments. "We're a feeder system," he says. "We don't have things like the highly competitive leagues. We have the introduction programs to get our members started on a sport, and then our members, if they want, can go to a more competitive environment like the Parks and Recreation departments for the opportunity to join a local league."

Just back from a national meeting, Michael explained the recent name change announcement. "The Y is still the YMCA, but we're making a change in the name so people can see all we do." A gradual migration from YMCA to Y is on the horizon. The areas of focus reinforced at the national level Y meeting support Michael's goal of community-building: healthy living, youth development and social responsibility. "We're not taking the C (Christian) out of YMCA. We're not a religious organization, but we do support Christian principles like the Golden Rule," he explains. "We do a lot of things, much more than just swim and gym. We're a non-profit organization that started out as a volunteer organization. We're here to help the community in everything we do. This branch alone gives out of \$500,000 worth of financial assistance in programs."

Michael loves to see entire families come to the Y. They can enjoy activities together or find programs of their own liking. "The mother can go to the Zumba class, dad can go to the fitness center, the 13 year old daughter can swim and the six year old son can go to Child Watch to be with friends," he says. He offers area residents to come in and try the Y for a week free of charge. "We want to make sure people feel comfortable here before they join," he adds.

He says he feels like he's continuing his small-town principles. "The Y lets you socialize and build community. You learn to get healthy and active. To see individual and family success is rewarding to me." He equates the Y to the church communities of Crewe. "You may not know everyone there but if a life change happens, a lot of people are there to help. If you are not feeling motivated, there are people who do not want you to give up. If you need someone to talk to, there is someone always available (staff or members). When you do well or meet a personal goal, there is someone celebrating with you with a big smile and a pat on the back. If a child is crying, there is someone to ask questions and find out the problem."

The main goal that Michael wants for himself reflects his work at the Y. "I feel the one thing I want to accomplish in life," he states, "is to carry on the values in my job and community that my parents, relatives, family and friends have taught me along my way. This is my mission and my personal goal. My legacy is the accumulation of all those who have had an impact on me." NDN

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