

Guest commentary

YMCA's mission begins with child care, wellness programs

By Paul Thein
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As a child growing up in the Midwest, I enjoyed participating in numerous YMCA programs. I started at the YMCA as a preschooler and soon attended the Y's after-school and summer day camps. Through the YMCA's tutelage, I learned to swim, skateboard, play racquetball, tennis and basketball, wrestle, and even sail a boat.

The YMCA taught me more than the rules of the sports; I learned about respect, responsibility, honesty and teamwork through the Y sports experiences.

Later in life, I reflected back to the values and experiences that shaped me as a person: family and the YMCA. After a successful career as an athlete, coach and college administrator, I set a goal to transfer my professional career from an administrator in higher education to one serving the mission of the YMCA, strengthening children, families and community.

My YMCA CEO experiences started in 2008 in Waycross, Ga., and a



Paul and Shanon Thein with their children Brody, 5, and Shalyn, 8.

110-year-old YMCA in the Deep South. I learned the impact a Y can have on a community. The same core values I learned as a young child participating in Y programs were prevalent in the actions of staff persons and community at the Waycross YMCA.

Even though my administrative Y experiences started thousands of miles

from my youth experiences in the Rochester, Minn., Y, it had a similar feel. It was a welcoming place well-known for helping people, and the programs were designed to strengthen the community as a whole.

This experience sharpened my senses on what truly makes a YMCA so special. It is not the pools or the gymnasiums that

make a Y so special. It is not even the fact that YMCAs are credited for inventing such diverse sports as basketball, volleyball and handball that make them special. The difference is the compassionate and caring staff, volunteers and donors who know the value a Y has on bettering the community.

In my five years in Waycross, we grew the membership and revenues. Most importantly, we changed lives! Through the help of strong community and corporate partners, we transformed our YMCA to a holistic healthy living center, a welcoming place that offered classes for everyone, regardless of gender, income status, race or religion.

When the Naples Y position opened, I felt it was a fit for me because Naples is filled with my family members, snowbirds from Minnesota. This is a place I can work hard on something I love and be close to the people I love.

God has blessed my family and me by giving me this opportunity and I can already see great things ahead for the Naples YMCA:

■ Building off the suc-

cess of the preschool, we plan to reinstate the summer camp and after-school programs.

Nationwide, the Y is known as one of the largest providers of child care. We plan to implement cutting-edge curriculum that is proven to develop and grow children physically, mentally and spiritually.

Today's generation of children is the first generation in the history of the world that is expected not to outlive the life span of their parents. This disturbing health prediction is contributed to the facts that our children are not healthy eaters and they are not exercising or participating in physical activities. A YMCA can make a difference, and we plan to do so!

Considering that we are the largest child care provider and the YMCAs started the nation's fitness movement, it gives us an edge to change behaviors and improve health habits.

Our staff's ability and our network to the national Y programs place us in a position to be a community leader.

■ The Greater Naples Y will be committed to partner with companies and

health agencies to keep down medical and insurance costs. We are a non-profit, and we have a responsibility to share what we do best. Working externally outside the walls and campus of the YMCA is a goal for our new corporate wellness program. Many YMCAs across the nation are working hand in hand with hospitals and the medical community in these corporate community partnerships. I envision a partnership with the medical community here in Naples to unveil some of the cutting-edge wellness programs very soon.

I am excited for the opportunities that this YMCA offers the citizens of Collier County. I am convinced that the YMCA programs are second to none and that a strong YMCA helps make a strong community.

With the help of a growing membership and an increase in the variety of program options, our caring volunteers, donors and community members will assist the Greater Naples Y in assuring we are here helping kids and families for generations to come.

Thanks for the opportunity.