

Howard Men's Basketball Announces 2023-24 Season Social Justice Project

Team to Partner with Youth Justice Advocates (YJA) in the Office of the Dean of the Chapel on 9-Week Mentorship Program

As it has done each season under Head Coach Kenny Blakeney, the Howard Men's Basketball program plans to spend 2024 investing in a social justice project that honors the legacy of activism at this historic institution.

Past projects have included advocacy for Black maternal health, voter registration, and a financial literacy series among other initiatives.

This year, the team has decided to focus on juvenile justice issues in their home city of Washington, DC, where an increasing number of young people are being impacted by violence in their neighborhoods. Mayor Muriel Bowser has declared this uptick in violence among the city's youth — as both accused perpetrators and victims — a public emergency.

As members of the community, the men of Howard's basketball program believe they can help, offering mentorship to the young people most directly impacted by this crisis.

Blakeney, recognized this fall as a "Standout Collegiate Athletic Coach" by the All-In Campus Democracy challenge, said the team will be mentoring young people at a juvenile detention center in D.C. through a 9-week program organized by Youth Justice Advocates (YJA), a student led group within the Office of the Dean of the Chapel on campus.

"I am excited to partner with Coach Blakeney and the basketball team," said Bernard Richardson, PhD, Dean of the Chapel. "I am extremely proud of the work they are doing and their desire to serve."

YJA has over 100 student volunteers who make weekly visits to the center, providing positive experiences for the roughly 80 young people, aged 12 to 20, who are housed there. The organization strives offset the school-to-prison pipeline to provide skills and resources to change the lives of youth in the criminal justice system.

"For our players to decide to pay it forward this year to the D.C. youth community, is particularly meaningful to me," says Coach Blakeney. "I know I would have never been able to become the man I am today without positive mentors like Dr. Joe Carr, Ed Hill, Geoff John, Morgan Wootten, Mike Brey, Tommy Amaker and Coach K. Our players now have the opportunity to become a similar light for the next generation, a responsibility I am excited to see them take on."

Mentoring is proven to be one of the most effective means of reducing crime rates among young people, as those with mentors are less likely to engage in violent behavior, have emotional outbursts and experience depressive symptoms. Children and teenagers who have experienced mentorship also have higher school enrollment rates (high school and college), stronger interpersonal relationships, and enhanced self-esteem.

“I believe that our youth is often a reflection of our society’s previous failures,” says Howard point guard and first-year law student, Joshua Strong. “In the same breath, I firmly believe that the youth possess the power and energy to remedy those failures. Unfortunately, a lot of our youth, especially in DC, have bore the brunt of American institutions. Instead of empowering the next generation, we tend to condemn; oftentimes focusing our attention on symptoms of systemic tragedies, rather than addressing its roots.”

“A lot is at stake right now, making the upcoming generations even more crucial, especially in terms of social justice. The path I’m on is in large part a function of the power my parents spoke into me and I would be remiss if I did not do the same for others. Our social justice initiative allows me to do so and I think it is a step in the right direction of reforming the way we treat juveniles who are caught up in a system that largely does not rehabilitate in the way we think or hope.”

The players and coaches of the Howard Men’s Basketball team hope that, by participating in the YJA mentorship program, they will be able to positively influence the lives of D.C. teens who are currently in the juvenile justice system — but who have their whole lives before them. The goal, the team says, is to make an impact in a way that could reduce recidivism and help their mentees find practical ways to overcome the social forces holding them back from reaching their full potential.

“It is an honor to partner with our champion Men’s Basketball team on their social justice project this season,” says Assistant Dean for Religious Life and YJA Advisor Nisa Muhammad. “These athletes are some of the most prominent and well-known members of our campus community, with a commitment to social justice forged on a campus embedded with advocacy. Their presence at the center will greatly enhance the weekly experience for the kids we meet with, as many of them look to become college athletes themselves one day.”

Last season’s social justice project, focused on Black maternal health advocacy, garnered national recognition from CNN, Time, and Uninterrupted. The team’s work was also recognized with the “Trailblazer Award” at the annual Women’s Ambassador Conference. Additionally, the team had the honor of advocating on the issue alongside Vice President Kamala Harris, the Congressional Black Caucus, Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra, and Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services Administrator Chiquita Brooks-LaSure.

“As proud as I am of what our team accomplished on the court last season with multiple MEAC Championships, it pales in comparison to the pride I felt in seeing them become the standard bearers of Black Excellence in the community through our maternal health advocacy,” Blakeney said.

For more information about the men’s basketball program, contact Daniel.marks@howard.edu.

For more information about YJA, contact Nisa.muhammad@howard.edu.