

Mike NICHOLS



Rebels for life

Victor Barnett has built the model of a successful anti-poverty program

Victor Barnett's first office was under a shade tree not far from a basketball court near N. 20th and W. Olive streets in Milwaukee.

He was maybe 19 years old and enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, but making the trek back to the neighborhood, where he coached a bunch of kids not much younger than he was. That was almost 35 years ago, back when towel-chomper Jerry Tarkanian coached the University of Nevada-Las Vegas Runnin' Rebels.

Barnett's playground teams decided to be Running Rebels, too – something that would come to mean a whole lot more than just learning how to set a pick or finding the space to run a fast break.

Creating space is not always easy.

There was a gang that had built a bike trail nearby, and its members “started to come over and recruit my kids from the basketball court,” Barnett recalls.

You can't have cops on every corner, or on every basketball court. There are 92 federal programs to fight poverty. Taxpayers spend \$800 billion a year on them. And, still, 22% of children in this country live below the poverty line. Social workers and program managers can only do so much. So Barnett — a self-described “country kid” who moved to Milwaukee from Mississippi when he was in seventh grade — did something only a guy with respect in the neighborhood could do. He talked to the gang. Asked for a little space.

And got it.

A gang leader, says Barnett, “allowed me to keep the kids on the court instead of over on the bike trail” that led off to God-knows-where.

The kids on the court became Running Rebels — and, all these years later, still are. When a generation of Milwaukee boys and men say they are “Rebels for life,” they aren't just

talking about basketball. Barnett has painstakingly built the very model of a successful, community-based, anti-poverty program with a track record of turning around lives.

For years, the Rebels had virtually no support. Barnett could easily have quit while all those tax dollars were thrown at other programs. Nowadays, the organization, run out of an old, cavernous building off Fond du Lac Ave., provides everything from tutoring to mentoring to lessons in anger management and personal accountability.

It organizes after-school Safe & Sound programs, helps run violence-free zones at local schools, and manages a Pipeline to Progress initiative that provides scholarships, job training and links to local businesses. Just as important, Running Rebels has kept countless juvenile offenders out of prison through intensive supervision — a program that leaders say has saved taxpayers more than \$64 million in incarceration costs.

Change must come from within but can't occur in isolation.

None of it can be done from Washington, D.C. Some would say that without cloning Victor Barnett, it couldn't be done elsewhere at all. But Barnett insists that others, given the right recognition and support, can replicate his success.

Running Rebels has a budget nowadays of about \$4 million, according to Barnett, and much of that comes from taxpayers. For all the times government spends anti-poverty money in the wrong way, it sometimes spends it in the right one. But, as Paul Ryan has found, creating opportunity can't just be about government. There has to be a broader community interest and local effort that recognizes that change must come from within but can't occur in isolation.

“We've got to see what they're doing, and not federalize it or institutionalize it. Just support it,” says Ryan, who uses Running Rebels as an example of the sort of program America needs to emulate. “That means open up this space for civil society, protect what they're doing, retell their story, and amplify their efforts.”

Because without them, a whole lot of kids would have lost their way long ago on that nearby trail. ■

Mike Nichols is president of the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute.