

Little Haiti Optimist Club goes beyond sports

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A group of professionals who grew up in Little Haiti are returning to the neighborhood to help start an Optimist Club, which will organize sports teams and other activities for local kids.

Optimist Clubs already organize youth sports leagues in neighboring areas such as Liberty City and Overtown, but Little Haiti hasn't had its own group.

The Little Haiti club will involve kids not only in sports but also in arts and cultural activities.

The club's sports will include track and field, basketball, soccer and tennis. But President Marie Louissaint said the new nonprofit organization also will expose Little Haiti's youth to film.

Louissaint, who runs an airport concession business, has created the Reel Opportunities Film and Video Program, which will teach kids ages 13 to 17 how to create and produce their own film or video.

Last week the film students met at the Little Haiti Cultural Center for the first day of the eight-week course.

Proud parent Isac Louimeus, who was born in Haiti, said he heard about the film program on a local Haitian radio station and he knew he had to get his 13-year-old son Casi involved.

Louimeus was excited about the new club.

"My son's name is my name spelled backward," the 58-year-old happily pointed out. "My son came here from Haiti in March after the earthquake and now that he's out of school for the summer, this is a good opportunity for me to do something for him and support him."

Reel Opportunities is led by two independent producers, Denzel Burnside and Wills Felin, who will teach the students how to shoot, produce and conduct on-camera interviews.

The 25 teens watched shows like BET's *106 and Park*, *60 Minutes* and *America's Most Wanted*. Felin said he showed the class different video segments so the teens can see a little bit of everything.

“I've taught classes like this before,” said Felin, “and at first some of the kids don't seem like they're into it. But when they start doing stuff and see their work, they get excited.”

Constant Antoine, a senior at Chanpagnat Catholic school in Allapattah, said the film class is something new for him because he hasn't had time to take a film class at school yet.

“At first I didn't understand what was going on in this class,” said the 17-year-old, “but I'm going to give this a try because I would like to be a producer for sports shows.”

Louissaint said the teens will attend several field trips throughout the summer to draw inspiration for their videos.

“They will be going on the set of the television show *Burn Notice* and they will attend the American Black Film Festival to interview the talent,” she said.

The new Optimist Club is not the first of its kind. There were two failed attempts to start an Optimist Club in Little Haiti -- once in 1994 and again in 2006, according to the regional club.

Louissaint's sister, Beatrice Louissaint, said the club will survive because they have a different approach to reaching out to the youth of Little Haiti.

“We are a group of really committed people, and several of our members have experience in working for nonprofits,” said Beatrice.

Beatrice, who manages a company that works to expand minority-owned businesses, said Reel Opportunities will ultimately teach kids about creativity and teamwork.

The new club has 50 members who range from restaurant owners to local politicians. The sports leagues and other club programs are free to the kids.

“Through our outreach programs we will impact approximately 500 households,” said Marie Louissaint of North Miami Beach. “We will clean Little Haiti, provide turkeys for Thanksgiving and give away book bags two weeks before the new school year starts.”

Board members meet every Wednesday at the Center for Haitian Studies, 8260 NE Second Ave.

Last month the group discussed ways to recruit students, names for their developing football team and a remembrance activity for Haiti's earthquake victims.

Board Member Irvence St. Jean still lives in Little Haiti and said the whole concept of his neighborhood having its own Optimist Club was enough to inspire him to join.

"Little Haiti needs this. We need to get our kids off the streets and get them involved. It's about time," said St. Jean, who runs an organization dedicated to raising money for Haiti.

He said the Optimist Club is unique as it is run by people from different professions, all of whom are passionate about the well-being of Little Haiti.

"I grew up in this 'hood," he said. "This club has so many different organizations, different programs and big names that like supporting kids."

The club is geared toward kids age 4 to 17 and its members not only work to improve their former neighborhood, but to improve the living conditions for the citizens of Haiti.

"Some members have been part of the rescue efforts in Haiti by donating funds and/or time," said Louissaint, a Barry University graduate. "I worked on an event called 'Water for Haiti' where we collected two million bottles of water for Haiti."

Louissaint said the programs and activities of the club are for kids primarily living in the Little Haiti area, but residents of other neighborhoods are welcome.

"This organization is open to all who want to support the youth of Little Haiti," she said.

For more information on Little Haiti Optimist Club, call 305-968-9310 or go to [Little Haiti Optimist.org](http://LittleHaitiOptimist.org).

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