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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 17, 2025

Midian Leadership Project receives $248,000 grant for innovative, trauma-informed youth prevention program

HUNTINGTON, W.Va. – The Pallottine Foundation of Huntington has awarded Midian Leadership Project in Charleston a $248,000 Core Priorities Initiative grant to launch its Trauma Healing and Empowerment through Athletics and Mentorship (TEAM) Project, which will expand the organization's sports-based youth development strategy and incorporate an evidence-based dignity framework into its coaching model. The program pairs young adult coaches with local public school athletic teams to provide a coaching environment that addresses multiple sources of childhood trauma that may contribute to mental health and substance use disorder challenges experienced by youth in low-income, multicultural communities.

"The new dignity framework we are incorporating is based on a piece of research from Dr. Donna Hicks at the Harvard Kennedy School that noted a violation of someone's dignity is processed by the brain the same way as being punched in the gut," said Turan De'Angelo Rush, COO of the Midian Leadership Project and Director of Sports Science and Nutrition for Capital High School Football.

Hicks' dignity model provides a framework for understanding how attention to dignity can help to strengthen relationships and resolve conflicts, and how violations of dignity can inevitably damage relationships, worsen conflicts and undermine organizational and community healing.

"Our coaches have had personal experience with this, having our dignity violated by authority figures in institutions like schools, and it hit home to read that," Rush continued. "There isn't much research yet about that kind of childhood trauma or how to help heal from it."

Midian's leadership team is comprised of young men who grew up in the Charleston area and are committed to mentoring and building strong relationships with youth in that same community to ensure their lifelong success. In addition to sports-based programming, these young leaders connect youth with a variety of support services, including after-school and weekend activities, academic tutoring, life skills education and nutrition programs, at the Midian Safe Haven community center.

Midian's coaching team has supported student athletes at Charleston's West Side Middle School and Capital High School since 2022. The program is made possible by a partnership with Up2Us Sports Network, a nationally recognized leader in sports-based youth development. Through the network's AmeriCorps program, Midian's coaches complete training to implement a unique, trauma-informed coaching strategy, which is backed by research that shows how positive team sports experiences can help "rewire" the brain's response to stress by providing a safe environment to engage in physical contact, make mistakes, receive guidance, and experience difficult emotions.

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“One of the biggest positive changes we have seen through the program is the players wanting to come to something because they have taken ownership of it,” Rush said. “The maturity growth we’ve seen in the kids is great. They want to be here and they want to do what we are doing. We have kids waking up at 5:30 to walk to a morning workout before school. That’s something you have to build, that mindset of ownership. Down the road, these kids become the ones who teach another group the holistic attitude of ‘heart, mind, soul, strength’ that Jesus taught us, and the community gets even stronger.”

Rush said the dignity framework helps the coaches learn new ways to build and develop relationships with student athletes.

“One part is acceptance of identity,” Rush said. “We can do a better job of accepting and identifying players’ culture and background with things as simple as handshakes and recognition. We make sure we recognize their goals, give them love and praise when they make progress. Inclusion and safety are important. People feel safe around us and we, as coaches, have to set that environment because it is important for healing and growing leadership.”

For more information about the Midian Leadership Project, visit https://www.midianproject.com/.

About the Pallottine Foundation of Huntington
The Pallottine Foundation of Huntington was established in 2018 following the sale of St. Mary’s Medical Center to continue the Pallottine Missionary Sisters’ legacy of caring for the spiritual, emotional and physical health of the community. The Foundation supports nonprofit organizations in 20 counties across West Virginia, Kentucky, and Ohio through the funding of projects and initiatives that focus on health and wellness, food insecurity, mental and behavioral health, substance use disorder, capacity building, and tobacco prevention and cessation. For more information, visit www.pallottinehuntington.org.

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