

## For the Love of the Program, James' Story

James\* is a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader at Frederick Douglass Elementary, one of our neighborhood schools. James has a ready smile and a sweet attitude and we enjoyed having him in our ToMorrow's Leaders program for the past two years. Over the summer though, James' attendance wavered and he dropped out of the ToMorrow's Leaders Summer Day camp. As we signed up children for the fall, repeated attempts to sign James up again failed. Calls weren't returned by his mom and no one was home when we stopped by. We waited, called, waited and still no registration forms for him.

It often comes up in Board of Director's strategy sessions or discussions with grant funders, what makes Touching Miami with Love unique to the community and we often say our size. "But your organization is so small compared to others," many say. "Exactly!" we reply. And because of our size, we get to know our children in our programs very well and will *often* go to great lengths to make sure that they are in our programs and the relationships continue.

So the first day of school arrived and there wasn't a registration form for James, so he wasn't added to the list for school pick up. But there James was in line for the TML van, just as he'd always been. Our staff was faced with a dilemma, here was James anxious and waiting to go to TML as he always had, but he wasn't registered for the program. Our ToMorrow's Leaders staff had to let James know that he wasn't signed up for the program and couldn't come. . . James was crushed and our staff member felt horrible.

An hour or so later, James' mom showed up with her registration form. James' passion for our program had *finally* spurred his mom to action. Now the problem was all the spots were full, there was a waiting list for our program. Again, you could see the joy just seep away from James' face. The staff was crushed too, here was this great kid who had been a part of our program for two years already and because of his mom's lack of initiative he wasn't going to be able to continue. We made a staff decision that he would be allowed to take the number 2 spot on the waiting list.

While James was waiting for an available spot on the waiting list, a full week passed. After getting in the TML van pick up line for four more days in a row hoping that today would be the day he'd get to go to TML, James finally got the message that he couldn't ride the TML van home. Still in love with TML and undeterred by this setback, he came up with another plan to be a part of things at TML.

James convinced one of his friends from school to run as fast as they could home (beating the TML van incidentally) and stop by TML on the way to say, "Hi!" Sitting at my desk in my office I have a view of the lobby through the front window and a convex mirror we have placed in the lobby. Typing away at my computer I suddenly heard two children burst into the lobby, run to the lobby window and scream out, "Hi everybody!" With that they quickly raced to door to make their quick exit, the only problem with their plan was that our front lobby door is a "PULL" and in their excitement they did a "PUSH" and effectively trapped themselves in the lobby.

Hearing the commotion I jumped up and opening the door to the office and saw two little boys looking back at me reminding me of looking out at a deer in headlights. The first words out were from James' friend, a not so faithful one apparently as he said, "It was James' idea!" "Alright guys, thanks for stopping by, however, you pushed the door the wrong way." A few minutes and 2 staff members help later, the boys were freed and ready to run the rest the way home (just a block further up the street).

The next day our children's director, Trina, and I were discussing enrollment and had to make another hard decision that one of the children who had signed up for ToMorrow's Leaders hadn't yet showed up and due to their excessive absences, would have to be put on the waiting list. The calls were made and a letter went out. We were sad to see this child not get a chance to be part of our program. But then things cheered up quickly as we remembered that James was now next on the waiting list.

What fun it was as our staff driver went to pick up the children from school that next day and announce, "Hey James, we've got a spot for you in the program . . . Come on and get on the van!"

\*Name changed to protect privacy