

One of my main projects since the beginning of my stay in Florida has been to develop an activity that would interest youth in effort to keep them off the streets and out of trouble. Last September, my boss, Kim, and I agreed that one of the best ways to reach our goal would be to develop a weight lifting ministry (much to my personal happiness).

I took one of the three rooms (a 12' by 20' rectangle) in the Branches building and converted it into a gym. The room was originally a thrift store, packed with all sorts of clothes and goods that I moved into our partnering church. By asking around, visiting yard sales, and searching on craigslist.com, I was then able to get a bunch of equipment donated to form the first ever Branches Gym. Packed inside this gym we have a few dumbbells, several curl bars, a bench press, an adjustable incline bench press, and a multi-purpose smith machine.



Although you can get a good workout in our small gym, the true purpose of this place is much greater than just improving physical health. Weight lifting is a tool that I use to build relationships with the teenagers. Since the gym is open three days a week, many kids everyday (we have about 8 teenage boys and 10 girls that are regular attendees). I believe the adage is true that young people spell love, T-I-M-E. Weight lifting provides a great opportunity to teach, mentor, and mold kids that might otherwise wander around the streets, join gangs, and get into trouble. I have had tons of conversations about God, drugs, girlfriends, sex, education, and all other issues that are important to teenagers.

One of the most faithful gym members is a guy named Victor. Victor has always been one of those kids that never became fully engaged in the youth group at Branches. Although he lives in the surrounding neighborhood in Florida City, he would only come to Branches every once in a while. We might see him for three weeks straight and then we wouldn't see him for a month. However, that all changed when the gym opened. Victor came for a couple of workouts and got hooked. He only missed a handful of workouts for the rest of the school year and even became involved in one of the Bible studies at Branches.

Many other teenagers have come to Branches for the first time by joining in a bench press or two. Some have stayed and gotten involved; others have not. Either way, the gym provides a low-pressure environment for teenagers to come and find out what Branches (and God) is all about.