

**Guest Column to The News-Star  
For the Sunday, May 24, 2015 Edition  
From Mayor Jamie Mayo**

**Elevating our City through Youth Enrichment Strategies**

Several years ago, my administration began an initiative that we named *Operation Y.E.S.* It stands for Youth Enrichment Strategies. The overall purpose is to create and enhance youth-centered projects and initiatives through city services, public and private partnerships. I'd like to share with you some of the various completed, ongoing, and upcoming projects and initiatives we are involved with. Perhaps you, your company, school, church or organization would like to be a part of our efforts.

For more than a decade, the City of Monroe has utilized several thousand federal Community Development Block Grant dollars to fund an afterschool program, ran at some of our community centers, which has helped hundreds of kids improve academically. A few days ago we celebrated the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Monroe Chapter of the O.K. (Our Kids) Program. This African-American male mentorship program, coordinated through the Monroe Police Department and a local board, has successfully served hundreds of junior high and high school aged boys. The program's purpose is simple – to reduce the high incarceration and homicide rate among African-American males between the ages of 13-18. This program has helped students improve their academic scores, social behavior, cultural awareness, and more. Some of the programs first participants have graduated from college and are on a pathway to success.

We can't forget to mention the Northeast Louisiana Soccer Association which operates in our very own Chennault Park. Each year, thousands of youth converge in our city for seasonal and tournament play. The City of Monroe, YMCA, East Ouachita Recreational District, Monroe Youth Baseball/Softball, Dixie League Baseball and others provide a variety of

youth sport leagues for athletes of all ages. City and Ouachita Parish gymnasiums and fields are among the places that they compete. Many community center parking lots are filled on evenings and weekends due to the number of special programs for girls and women. This increased female participation in our community centers is thanks to the activities spearheaded by Recreation Program Facilitator Seletta McClinton. I want to encourage new and long-term residents to participate in these programs and enroll your kids in one of these leagues so they can enjoy the priceless experience and memories that come with sports competition and making new friends.

Thanks to the support of the Monroe Garden League, the Scott Foundation, Monroe-West Monroe CVB, multiple city departments and others, we just opened a new Playscape and Splash Pad at the Louisiana Purchase Gardens & Zoo. In the coming months, we will host several ribbon cuttings for new or enhanced facilities that will benefit the young and the young at heart. We recently completed six new outdoor public restrooms at various city parks and community centers throughout Monroe. Finishing touches are being made in preparation of a new walking trail at Magnolia Park, in the Lamyville neighborhood. New playground equipment has recently been installed at our E.P. Robinson, Marbles, and Powell community centers. Thanks to partial funding from Ouachita Well, we will soon open the brand new Lida Benton Park, just off Lee Avenue in south Monroe. Once an empty lot and site of a former school, this park will feature a walking trail, exercise stations, multiple playscapes, covered pavilions, a basketball court, baseball field and outdoor restrooms.

One of the next big projects that we are excited about is the development of a state-of-the-art Youth Baseball Complex. As I stated in my State of the City Address, we want to work together with other partners to create opportunities for more young people to learn and play the beautiful game of baseball. We know that a new complex with eight or more fields that can be used for baseball or softball would be huge in our efforts to expand local leagues and recruit and land various tournaments. This project would give more kids an opportunity to play, and it would be the source of a huge

economic boost to our city, parish and region. As plans develop, we need interested individuals, businesses and organizations to contribute their skills, services, and financial support for this city-wide youth effort.

As I close, I have a message for our students. First of all, congratulations the Class of 2015! I had the honor of attending multiple awards senior awards day ceremonies at local high schools. Our 2015 *Entergy-City of Monroe Community Service Scholarship* winners are among a special group of students who truly “get it”. They have excelled academically and in the field of community service. Each of these students will attend Louisiana colleges & universities and have great plans for the future. I’m proud to say that over the past 14 years we have awarded 153 scholarships (all private funds) to students who are committed to making a difference in our community.

We commend all graduates for achieving the important goal of earning your high school diploma or college degree. We encourage you to always strive for honorable achievement in every field of human endeavor. Make sure your life has the proper balance of faith, family, fun, finances and fitness. Try to be a role model or mentor to help someone else achieve their dreams.

For parents and those who are still in school—my message is simple....FINISH STRONG! No matter what is happening in your life, you need to finish school. Students dropping out or quitting is never the answer. Think about those you love, those you want help, and those who you will be responsible for. Think about them and put yourself in the best position to succeed.

It all begins with your education. You need an education and marketable job skills to get a good job in our evolving economy. When a person has a good paying job, he or she is able to buy a home, a car, and shop for what they need or want to survive. The more money people spend...the more tax revenue is generated for our city, parish and region. That gives us more money to contribute toward future youth enhancement projects and

initiatives like those I have shared with you in this article. The best way to contribute toward the quality of life for our kids is through active civic-engagement and being a tax-paying citizen.

Monroe is one city, with one future!