



*Pastor Joe leads large group lessons, followed by small group time, on Wednesday evenings and Sunday mornings at Stonebriar Community Church.*

**IT'S TOUGH** to be a kid today. In a society that is constantly pushing them to grow up faster than ever before, the pressure can be overwhelming. With the media, music and the Internet bombarding them with a never-ending barrage of sexually explicit, violent and drug- and alcohol-fueled messages, today's kids are facing a deluge of negative influences that can wreak havoc in their lives, both today and for years to come.

And while the battle to combat these negative forces lasts throughout the teen years and beyond, it's best started in the formative years, as the struggle for identity is just beginning to take root. "The preteen years are the most crucial age to reach kids as they are struggling to figure out what it means to be a young man or young woman in our society," says Joe Harms, youth pastor at Stonebriar Community Church in Frisco. "The foundation being set now will be the one that carries them into the teen years, and the attitudes they form now will affect their choices for the rest of their lives."

Knowing what a critical time the preteen years are for children, Pastor Joe, as he is known around Stonebriar, was called to do something meaningful for the 5th and 6th grade age group. "This group gets lost in the shuffle because they are too old for the little kid's program, but not quite ready for the teen group. Yet they are dealing with things most of us adults didn't face until

children, they now must start to examine the claims of the Bible and decide if they will accept these teachings as their own and put them into practice, not consider them just their parent's religion. We need to help them make the right choices and learn to put others first, though this is not human nature, especially during this age which is so full of introspection and self-study," he explains.

The program, which takes place on Wednesday evenings and Sunday mornings, begins with fun activities, like pelting each other with Nerf rockets and other active play, and then transitions into a large group lesson led by Pastor Joe, followed by small group time,

where the leaders breakdown the lessons in a more personalized setting. "The small group leaders are really the heart and soul of Junction 56," notes, Pastor Joe. Without their support and willingness to volunteer their time, the program would not be possible."

Small group leader Megan Cagle, one of 60 small group leaders, has been a

## Directing Kids at the Crossroads

BY CHRIS MARTIN

we were much older," he points out. Enter Junction 56 (the "56" coming from the grades of the children in the program), a program created to encourage preteens to pursue Christ, personalize their faith, practice holiness and prefer others. "We want these kids to realize they are beginning a life-long adventure of knowing and following Christ. No longer considered

volunteer for four years and loves every minute she spends with her group. "The small group time is where we really connect with the kids and talk about what is going on in their lives and guide them in how to apply the lessons discussed to their individual circumstances," says Mrs. Cagle. As a mom to 6th grader, Anna, and 8th grader, Austen, who participated in the program previously, Mrs. Cagle says she has seen what a challenge it is for kids to "own" what they have been taught. "At this age they can start to apply what they have learned about living a Godly life. Junction 56 helps them understand this and guides them on how to follow these Christian principles in their daily lives." And while sometimes kids at this age seem to be uninterested in these types of messages, Mrs. Cagle found just the opposite to be true. "Never has there been a time that my children did not want to go to Junction 56," she affirms. "It's fun and it's meaningful; they just love going." She credits Pastor Joe with making the program, which boasts almost 300 participants, so successful. "Pastor Joe is such an inspiration; he is so passionate about his beliefs and is truly called to help these kids find the right path in this crazy culture. Plus, he is a big kid too and the kids respond to that. He knows how to reach them and it really makes an impact."



impact. "Junction 56 has truly been life-changing for both my children," says Ms. Bianchi Jones. "My girls have gained so much through the program. They have learned what it means to truly be spiritual—how to put others first and how to spend time each day reflecting on God's word and to put what they have learned to use in their everyday lives." She also credits the work of Pastor Joe for making Junction 56 such a positive experience for her girls. "He is so authentic and sets such a great example of what a good Christian looks like. This world says 'take, take, take' and he teaches them about the importance of giving of themselves to help others," she says. And while her daughters have moved on

where she is.

And if the testimony of Ms. Bianchi Jones isn't enough to convince you of the positive impact of Junction 56, her daughter, Amanda, now in the 10th grade, is equally enthusiastic about her time spent in the program. "It was the most influential part of my preteen development. It helped my spiritual development so much," she remarks. "I don't feel like I would be the grounded person I am today without the guidance I got in Junction 56." She says that the program was not only an "absolute blast," but also very educational, adding that Pastor Joe really "knows how to get on the level of kids that age and tells them what they really need to know to live a Godly and successful life."

David Avedikian is such a believer in Junction 56's merits that he serves as a small group leader and doesn't even have children old enough to participate. "After hearing about the mission of the program from Pastor Joe, I was so inspired and

*At the 2010 Quest for Manhood retreat fathers and sons perform a rite of passage, learning to knot a tie, above. Kids kick off their day with fun activities, such as finger-rocket wars, at this year's retreat, below. provided by Joe Hurms*



Danielle Bianchi Jones, a current small group leader with two daughters, who participated in the program and have moved on to the teen group, couldn't agree more about the program's positive

from Junction 56, Ms. Bianchi Jones has no plans to stop being a group leader. She says she has benefited so much from being involved that she wants to stay right

felt that this was where I was being led to serve," says the father of two sons, age five and seven. He believes the real magic starts as the boys begin to get more comfortable

around the leaders and they start to open up. "It takes time for them to do so, but eventually a relationship develops and they look to us not on a parent level, but as a friend they can talk to in a safe and non-threatening environment about whatever issues they are dealing with," he adds.

Mr. Avedikian also admits to almost being "jealous" that his sons aren't old enough to attend the father/son retreat, which has become a Junction 56 tradition. The retreat, which is held at Camp Hoblitzelle in Midlothian, Texas, focuses on defining what it means to be a Godly man. "It's a great time and we see such a change in so many of the boys when they come back from the retreat," he notes. "It's like the retreat is the starting point of maturity and they actually learn what it means to be a man and you can see that."

Tom Parsons attended the latest retreat with his son Dylan, who is now beginning his second year in Junction 56. "It's an incredible forum for talking to my son about what a real man looks like. We discuss respecting women, what having good character means and how to start accepting responsibility for leading a true Christian life," says Mr. Parsons. He believes there is much to be gained in this type of environment, citing the benefits of unplugging from the world to discuss important topics, but doing so in a fun and friendly way. "Plus, there is great group momentum built up as other men are rolling up their sleeves with you and accepting the responsibility of turning their sons into men of integrity," he adds.

Megan Cagle and her daughter attended the Junction 56 mother/daughter retreat, which is held at the same location but at a



Megan Cagle, small group leader, teaches children how to apply the lessons to their individual circumstances.

different time. "It was a lot of fun for both of us to get together and bond," recalls Mrs. Cagle, whose son and husband also attended the boy's retreat. "For the girls, our focus was on purity and learning what it means to respect yourself and all of those related issues she will soon be struggling with. It was educational and fun and allowed us to deal with these tough topics in a very relaxed and positive manner. It was a great experience." So much so that she plans to stick with Junction 56 even after her daughter moves on. "I have grown so much just to see things click for some of these kids, it really is unbelievable," she says.

In addition to yearly retreats and weekly meetings, Junction 56 also schedules fun outings for the preteens to bond together and enjoy each other's company. "Sometimes we have a bowling night, a lock-in or talent nights, whatever seems fun," says Pastor Joe. And even though the

kids think it's all about the fun, Pastor Joe calls it fun with a purpose. "We want the kids to feel a strong connection with their small group members and leaders so they are eager to come to the meeting and feel comfortable sharing their feelings within the group," says Pastor Joe.

And while Junction 56 and Pastor Joe enjoy making the path of learning how to lead a Christ-centered life fun, it's not something Pastor Joe takes lightly. "I've got a big responsibility with these kids, and I am so honored to work with each and every one of them," he says thoughtfully. And though he knows Junction 56 can't change the world, he believes it can affect change in the hearts and souls of many of the kids who participate. "And I know many of them will go on to share what they have learned with others, and by doing so, it means we can make a difference in the world. I truly believe that." And so do the many who have had Junction 56 in their lives. "It's unusual to find a program that is so genuine," says Danielle Bianchi Jones. "It really has been life-changing. That's the best way I can find to explain it, simply life-changing."

Chris Martin is a freelance writer who finds writing cheaper than therapy.

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