

## Diamonds In The Rough

By Bryan Bergner, Golf Course Superintendent, Westmoor Country Club

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once stated, "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'" I came across this quote about a year ago and it made me ask myself what it was I was doing for others, and in particular, what I was doing for people in my own community that are in need of a helping hand. The answer, sadly, was not much. So, I decided I had to do something to change that. But what?

Months passed, and I struggled with finding a cause or an organization that really moved me to action. And, I had lots of excuses. Then, one night, as I sat at the dining room table working on my hiring plan for the 2013 season, my wife (knowing that I sometimes recruit high school students) asked me if I had ever tried to recruit grounds crew applicants from City of Milwaukee schools. I had not, for no reason other than it had not been done before. My wife pressed me on that and encouraged me to think more critically about not only my hiring plan, but about my participation as a superintendent within the larger community. You see, my wife is a lawyer, so her "encouragement" is more like an interrogation, which meant I was not able to get up from that table until I had good answers to those questions. But, sometimes that is what it takes, and because of her "encouragement," the "Diamonds in the Rough" internship at Westmoor Country Club was launched.

The concept was simple: commit several summer positions to high school students who come from disadvantaged circumstances, but who demonstrate an interest in achieving success despite those disadvantages. But finding those "Diamonds in the Rough" was not so simple. After developing the concept for the internship program, I spent weeks (unsuccessfully) canvassing guidance counselors, writing letters, and trying to make connections that could help me find my first "Dia-

monds in the Rough." By this time it was the end of February, so I was not only discouraged by the lack of progress but also anxious because I had to finalize my crew.

Just as I was about to give up, I connected with the Operation Dream organization in Milwaukee. Operation Dream is a non-profit that serves young males, ages 4-17, whose environments put them at particular risk and for whom similar organizations are out of reach due to poverty and lack of transportation. Like similar mentoring organizations, Operation Dream provides programming designed to build leadership, academic, and social skills. But unique to Operation Dream is a program called Operation Work, which is a hands-on, incentive-based program for young men ages 11-17 in which they learn the basics of work, employment and self-sufficiency. The fact is, many of these young men have never known a man who works, so the program helps them to develop the "soft skills" so many of us learned by simply growing up around good male role models. High school students in the Operation Work program are then encouraged to go out and find employment. This, of course, is where the Operation Work program dovetailed perfectly with my Diamonds in the Rough internship concept.

The Operation Dream staff prepared the candidates well for their first job interviews. They came ready to impress, with positive attitudes and well thought out questions. From those interviews, we hired two young men from the Operation Work program to join our summer crew — Antwan and Demetrius. The boys started with little knowledge



**Antwan Powell mowing his 1st green at Westmoor CC.**

of the game of golf let alone what goes into maintaining a high-quality golf course. Although Westmoor is only 14 miles west of downtown Milwaukee, from the perspective of these kids, it might as well be a different planet.

Even without a background in golf, Antwan and Demetrius came eager to learn. They learned how to mow greens and fairways and how to rake bunkers. We also worked on soft skills, such as the importance of a firm handshake and looking a person in the eye when you talk to them. The boys quickly became an integral part of our crew and that allowed them to develop a sense of importance and responsibility they were not always familiar with.

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As the summer progressed, I watched as Antwan and Demetrius developed into confident young men capable of holding their own with the more experienced crew members. I found it particularly refreshing that the boys did not arrive with a sense of entitlement, which I have encountered so often with high school and college students over the years. Overall, the internship was an overwhelming success for the boys and for our crew.

Towards the end of the summer, as a way to celebrate the successful season, we hosted a golf outing for roughly 20 of the Operation Dream boys on our five-hole Little Links Course. With my guidance, Antwan and Demetrius prepared a Keynote presentation about their summer job experience at Westmoor, which they then presented to the Operation Dream boys at the outing. Watching Antwan and Demetrius confidently explain the intricacies of mowing a green and how great it feels to be responsible for an exceptional work product was one of the most rewarding moments of my career.

Antwan and Demetrius learned a lot this last summer; but, in all honesty, I may have learned more. They reminded me of the many things I've taken for granted in my own life — things that allowed me to get where I am today. I understand now that my skills as a superintendent do not just allow me to grow grass and improve the golf course. I can use those same skills, as we all can, to grow better people and improve the communities around us.

On a side note, Antwan was recently featured in the “It’s Aaron” video series with Green Bay Packer great Aaron Rodgers. I encourage you to watch the video on [itsaaron.com](http://itsaaron.com) and see what Aaron Rogers has to say about Antwan and Operation Dream.



**Demetrius Turnage mowing a fairway at Westmoor CC.**



**Operation Dream outing on the Little Links Course**