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Former SU basketball standout seeking literacy slam dunk

By BRIAN BREHM The Winchester Star
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Former Shenandoah University basketball player Chris Rhone is seen in this file photo.

Provided photo

Chris Rhone was one of the best student athletes to ever attend Shenandoah University. The native of Washington, D.C., was a leading scorer for the Hornets' men's basketball team in his junior and senior years (2003-2005), racking up 975 career points in just two seasons and being named SU's Men's Basketball Player of the Year in 2004 and '05.

Rhone, who stayed in Winchester after graduation to raise a family and start a business, never forgot the "student" part of being a student athlete. From the day he launched his Unique Hoops Basketball Academy in 2009, he has made sure that the young players he trains balance their time on the court with time in the classroom.

Seventeen years after Unique Hoops first opened its doors, Rhone's passion for helping young people in the Winchester area succeed, both athletically and academically, is stronger than ever. Evidence of that is apparent in two recently created literacy programs that he oversees, one at his Unique Hoops academy and the other on behalf of the Winchester Area NAACP, where he serves as lead of the nonprofit's Education Committee.

An even more telling example of Rhone's passion for helping children thrive is evidenced in the new name of his business. Unique Hoops Basketball Academy recently became the Unique Hoops Educational Academy.

"We've been doing so many things throughout the years, doing so much stuff in the community, that I told my wife, 'Let's change the name,'" Rhone said this week.

As a mentor, Rhone requires his academy attendees to maintain good grades in school. As a coach, he shows them basketball skills that can give them a competitive edge on the court. Ultimately, his goal is to get every one of his student-athletes to attend college and play basketball at the collegiate level.

"You can ban books all day but if somebody doesn't know how to read, they wouldn't know what's in those books," Rhone said. "Math and reading are key fundamental skills, the tools that you need in life. Growing up and going to the library, going to the Boys and Girls Club, was so impactful in my life."

To promote the importance of literacy, Rhone said he agreed to lead the local NAACP's Education Committee and introduce a new initiative, the Family Reading Challenge.

"I wanted to get kids reading at the library again and show them all the resources that the library has," he said, "and I'm trying to get families back to reading what their children get."

The Family Reading Challenge, which begins next month, is simple and straightforward, encouraging parents and guardians to read to their children for 20 minutes a day.

"In the month of November, we start with five days," Rhone said, meaning that adults have to read to their kids for 20 minutes a day for a total of five days. "In December, we're going to take 10 days. In January, it will be 15."

The reading requirement goes up to 20 days in February and 25 days in March before culminating in April with 30 days of reading as a family in daily 20-minutes increments.

At the end of each month, Rhone said there will be an opportunity for parents and guardians who have accepted the Family Reading Challenge to provide updates on their progress and hear from other families.

"We're going to do a [monthly] Zoom meeting and discuss how this has impacted the families, ask what they have been reading, share other ways to read as a family," Rhone said. "It's a lot of different things that we want to sample with this initiative. ... I think it's going to bring kids back to the concept of reading again."

To sweeten the deal, Rhone said prizes will be awarded to families that complete the challenge "just to say that we appreciate you."

Rhone has also created a new reading initiative at Unique Hoops Educational Academy called Literacy: Read, Play and Grow. The program that combines education with playtime will begin on Nov. 7 and is open to children in first through third grades.

"It's a very critical age for them to learn," Rhone said.

There will be a theme for each month — leadership and bullying, for example — that will be tied into the titles read to the kids and the conversations that follow.

Literacy: Read, Play and Grow attendees will meet from 10 to 11 a.m. Saturdays at Unique Hoops, 1810 Roberts St. in Winchester, and children will be read to for 20 minutes each time.

"After reading, they're going to have free play," Rhone said.

Participants will have 30 minutes each week to play games, engage in activities and jump inside a moon bounce.

The literacy program will be held weekly through May and, best of all, is offered for free.

"My wife and I wanted to do this for the community," Rhone said.

To learn more about Literacy: Read, Play and Grow, go to uniquehoops.com/literacy-program. Information about the Family Reading Challenge can be found at the Winchester Area NAACP's Facebook page, facebook.com/NAACPWinchesterArea. And to see the programs and offerings at Rhone's Unique Hoops Educational Academy, go to uniquehoops.com.

— Contact Brian Brehm at bbrehm@winchesterstar.com

Brian Brehm

Reporter