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# SLAM

## From Tragedy To Triumph

**Gardiner Memorial Classic Tournament- a basketball tournament celebrating the life of lost ones while spreading love and peace.**

*by Franklyn Calle*

Friday, August 20th, 2010 at 5:46 pm

Over two thousand people packed St. James Park in the Bronx last weekend for the 5th Annual Gardiner Memorial Classic Tournament. The event featured eight pro men's teams in a single game elimination bracket. By Sunday night, Body Snatchers from Kingsbridge and Sure Shots of Fordham were the only two teams standing. But before the 6pm scheduled championship game could tip-off, the charged clouds unleashed on much of the city, causing many to scramble from the rain. The tournament had to go on, and so the title game was moved to the famed Gauchos Gymnasium, also in the Bronx.

Not knowing whether many people would bother to make the trip to Gauchos, which was about a 20 minute ride from the park, expectations weren't to high. To the surprise of many, by the time the game got underway, the Gardiner Memorial Classic was hosting a packed gym.

While Richard Forrea and Malloy Nesmith tried to keep the game close for the Sure Shots, behind the leadership of David Seagers and Lester Hunte, Body Snatchers eventually pulled away to a 115-97 victory. Seagers took home the MVP honors. Participating in the tourney were other renowned names such as former Phoenix Suns and Philadelphia 76ers player Trevor Ruffin, former Syracuse University standout and '01 2nd round draft pick Damone Brown, former Hofstra University standout Loren Stokes, and former Cincinnati standout Leonard Stokes, among many other high school and college prospects. Former New York Knicks star John Starks and current Detroit Pistons guard Ben Gordon also made special guest appearances.

But this is just the side story.



The story within the story is the significance of the event and the motivation behind it.

Dexter Gardiner, the founder of the Gardiner Memorial Foundation as well as the tournament, started this summer classic in 2006 as way to remember the life of his mother, who'd passed away in January of that year, and his sister, who passed away of cancer in June of the same year. But tragedy struck once again that July when his twin brother, Derrick, who came up to New York from Mississippi to take part in the memorial, got into a fatal car accident in the Bronx River Parkway as they left the event. The accident killed him and five other family members, including his 6-year old daughter and three nephews.

Dexter and Derrick were streetball legends around Kingsbridge, the neighborhood where the park hosts the annual event. "2006 was devastating for me, so out of that I just started it. At one time, I gave up on everything," says Dexter. "But somehow the Lord just blessed me to continue with it and every year it just got bigger and bigger."

That very first year, Dexter had about \$1,500 for the event and simply began pressing t-shirts. That was the case for the first three years until the law firm Gersowitz Libo & Korek stepped in.

"At first, we just played with what we had. My brother and I were streetball legends around the way and people knew who we were, so people came out to support the community. Every year it just got bigger," Gardiner recalls. "We went from pressing up t-shirts with no numbers on the back to full uniforms."

Dexter, 44, played in a adults Westchester county league with Jeff Korek, a partner at Gersowitz Libo & Korek. They were teammates for more than a year, when Gardiner walked up to Korek and gave him a flyer for the 2009 memorial. He was collecting any contributions possible for the event. Korek, moved by the circumstances and the tragedy behind the event, decided to go back to his office and talk to the other partners at the firms about the tournament. It didn't take long before they all signed on.

"I thought it would be great if Dexter and I partnered up, and if our law firm gave back to the community by giving him some support financially," says Korek.

The law firm contributed over \$30,000 for the tourney's expenses. During halftime of this year's championship game, four large flat screen TVs and an iPad were raffled off to adults in attendance. For the children: 48 book bags with school supplies in them were given away, 12 laptops to kids 12 and younger were donated, and four \$1,500 scholarships were offered to selected college-bound students. In addition, there was enough food and refreshments for everyone in attendance. Macaroni and cheese, BBQ chicken, rice, and burgers were all part of the menu. And did I mention that it was all free?

"I think that Dexter's story is a great story of overcoming human tragedy as supposed to kind of laying down and surrendering. It's all about getting back on your feet and pulling the community together. Kind of give them support and find support in them," says Korek (left, in green basketball uniform). "While we do a lot of work trying to help people and repair their lives, Dexter's living it and trying to contribute to people and repair their lives in a real way. This two-day event I think pulls together a community that needs help in a lot of ways."



This year, Bronx borough president Ruben Diaz, Jr., Assemblyman Michael Benjamin and his chief-of-staff and wife Kennedy Benjamin, were among the four or five elected officials that stopped by to show their support.

Gardiner's (above, in baby blue polo shirt) mission is clear and simple.

"One thing I want to do when people leave from here is see how loving people can be. They consider this area a bad neighborhood and for the last four years we haven't had a single problem. The people in the community look forward to this," he says.

"It's been beautiful. People come out and show love. There's never any violence. That's basically what I wanted to do because my mom basically raised me and my family that way. God has just blessed us with what we are doing in the community."

Kudos to [lawyertime.com](http://lawyertime.com) (Gersowitz Libo & Korek), Dexter Gardiner and his staff for this one of a kind event!