



Skateboarding for Jesus



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(AJ Rogers is the vice president of the synod's Lutheran Youth Fellowship board. This article is adapted from one that appeared in the March 16, 2008, edition of the Easton Express.)

Three years ago, AJ Rogers had a bright idea: He wanted to start a skateboard company.

His incentive? It sounded like fun.

Today, the 17-year-old from South Side Easton is part-owner of Graffiti Skateboards, a Christian-based skateboard business that designs and sells custom-made boards in skate shops in the Easton area.

The merchandise is emblazoned with Christian images. The underbelly of the board Rogers rides has a red heart with a cross through the center.

Not only are he and friends Mike Bazulka and James Darwin selling great skateboards, Rogers says, they're "sharing the word" as well.

Not bad for someone who was then an 11th-grader.

These days, one of AJ's biggest concerns is getting kicked off private properties with ideal skateboarding conditions. However, a couple of years ago, he says, it was whether or not he'd live to see graduation.

Upon initiation into a gang in just his first year of high school, AJ says his grades fell, relationships with friends and family grew tense and hopes for a positive future began to disintegrate.

Tired of a destructive lifestyle, AJ decided to shed what he calls



the "I'm thug this, I'm thug that, I can do whatever I want" mentality and finally faced the person he had become.

AJ says his family was a key motivation for breaking away from the gang, but he also credits his transformation with a powerful moment that occurred at St. Paul Evangelical Church, 610 W. Berwick St., Easton.

"I heard the sermon on what's right and what's equal, and it just really affected my life," says Rogers, a senior at Easton Area High School. "Right then and there."

AJ says as he sat in a pew listening to the Rev. David Newman speak, it was as if someone flipped a switch. One visit turned into another and, according to Pr. Newman, AJ is now a valuable role model as vice president of the church youth group.

"He's a natural-born leader who builds the community up and has a lot of different types of friends because of it," Pr. Newman says.

One of those friends, Jason Gilbert, a classmate of AJ's since kindergarten, considers AJ more than simply someone with whom to hang out.

"AJ likes to teach people and he knows what he's talking about," says Gilbert, who's also involved with the church. "He's always there."

So how does skateboarding fit into the equation when it comes to religion?

"Skate church" is what AJ and Pr. Newman call the weekly meetings in the basement of Christ United Methodist Church at West Berwick and Seitz streets in Easton. On Friday nights, teens fuse worship and skating together without having to worry about getting hounded by police for skating where they're not welcome.

Sometimes, AJ says, up to 30 teens participate.

"He's going to be a pastor when he graduates," said AJ' mother, Melody Rogers. "I'm so proud of him doing this and getting other neighborhood kids who might have strayed and are now a big part of the church."

Although AJ aspires to go to college and eventually the seminary, he vows to return to Easton.

"There's a lot that needs to be done," he says. "Gangs, drugs, no love. No love as in you can't walk down the street without someone giving you the stink eye."

AJ says he's grateful for abandoning the gang lifestyle. The

pressure is always there. But, AJ says he's found in all areas of life that honesty — with everyone — is the best policy.

"Just talk to them," he says of others. "Don't be scared and don't be stubborn. Just listen to what people have to say to you."

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