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Alonzo Mourning discusses Saturday's 'celebration of giving, growth and progress' in Overtown

BY ANTHONY CHIANG
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A photo of the newly constructed and redesigned Overtown Youth Center. COURTESY OF OYC MIAMI
Courtesy of OYC Miami

Former Miami Heat center and current Heat executive Alonzo Mourning is ready to celebrate this weekend.

Mourning and Tracy Wilson Mourning are hosting the Overtown Youth Center Miami's "It's All Overtown" 20th Year Celebration Platinum Affair on Saturday night at the newly constructed and redesigned OYC.

"The fundraising event will commemorate two decades of service to children, families, and adults in urban communities across Miami-Dade and South Florida, in addition to celebrating the grand opening of OYC Miami's new facility, which was completed in July 2023," according to a press release issued to announce the event. "The goal of this event is to raise funds for the long-term sustainability of OYC Miami, while also showcasing the redesigned center comprised of 56,000 sq ft., 14 classrooms, a cafeteria, a health and wellness service center, a gym, and many more spaces."

Here's the Miami Herald's conversation with Alonzo ahead of Saturday's event (this interview was edited for brevity):

What is it about Overtown that led you to focus your efforts on that community?

Alonzo: "It's not just that area. It's not. It's all the inner-city areas. When you think about all of our inner cities and you think about the lack of resources that many of our inner cities have compared to other communities, it's disheartening, it really is. When you think about developing families and children and helping them become positive contributing citizens, you think about support, giving. Whether it be education, whether it be social services, whether it be mentoring, whether it be teaching them hygiene, how to take care of themselves, addressing any mental health and wellness issues. Unfortunately in the inner city, they lack those amenities.

"What we've done as the Mourning Family Foundation and also my staff at the Overtown Youth Center and my ex-wife's program, the Honey Shine Mentoring Program, what we've done is we've tried to create an atmosphere where we can help children and families cross the finish line. It's as simple as that."

Which needs does your foundation focus on addressing?

Alonzo: "First of all, education is the No. 1 priority. Helping these young people embrace and understand the importance of education. That is extremely important. Outside of that is the need of them having somewhere to go and having somebody to hold them accountable for their actions. That's it. If these kids have somewhere to go and have somebody who cares about them and that's a consistent voice in their lives and somebody who they trust, then they're more quick to make better decisions than if they don't have that.

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When you reflect on 20 years of work in Overtown, what comes to mind?

Alonzo: “It’s actually been a little longer than 20 years, it has been. But with the work that we’ve done in the Overtown Youth Center, it’s been a little over that. But to tell you the truth, I’m not about counting. Yeah, we want to do this because we want to continue to bring attention to the work that we’ve been doing. I think that’s extremely important because the more we’re able to create awareness, the more support that we’ll get. So from an awareness standpoint, yes it’s extremely important. We want to do events like this to educate the community on the work that we’re doing.”

When did your philanthropic work in South Florida begin?

Alonzo: “I got here in 1995, it started in 1997. In 1997, I started the charitable work through Zo’s Summer Groove. I started Zo’s Summer Groove in 1997 and the rest is history after that. Initially when Zo’s Summer Groove started, I started with the intentions of helping foster kids, which I was one of those kids. I was trying to help foster and inner city kids and I would try to help young Black men with the organization called 100 Black Men of America and Children’s Home Society. I was trying to help kids in foster care. So we donated money to those organizations over time. With the efforts of Zo’s Summer Groove, that grew for 16 years and it attracted the attention of individuals in this community. One of the individuals that we attracted was Martin Margulies, who’s a developer and a rare art collector. Martin basically said, ‘Look, man. I admire what you’re doing. I want to do my part.’ That’s when the OYC started. He built the first Overtown Youth Center right next to Gibson Park right on park property.”

“He dragged me around to different City Council meetings. Mind you, I didn’t understand the magnitude of what was going on because my focus was trying to win a championship at that particular time. This is in the late ‘90s like in 1999, 2000. And finally we got the property. And Marty came out of pocket about \$3.4 million at that time and he built the 18,000 square-foot facility. That’s how it all happened. He told me one thing, he said: ‘Look, I’m not going to sit around and help you do this. I built the place for you. Just promise me one thing, promise me that you use every square foot in this building to help the children and families in this community.’ That wasn’t difficult for me at all, it really wasn’t.”

You weren’t born in Miami, but you’ve stayed here and done so much work here. Why do you feel so connected to this community?

Alonzo: “First of all, I’ve been here over half my life. What has attracted me to this community is understanding that there’s a certain population here that has been neglected. They have. Unfortunately, not enough is being done for all the folks and the families that are west of 95. ... Still there’s communities like Overtown, Carol City, Liberty City, Opa-Locka, the list goes on. There are inner cities that are extremely impoverished and these are the fans that lifted me up over the years. So I feel like with all the contributions that have been made to my life and has allowed me to get to where I am, I feel like I owe this community. I do, I feel like I owe them the support necessary for their children’s children to accomplish their dreams just like I accomplished mine.”

Is the Overtown Youth Center’s new facility a brand new building?

Alonzo: “We actually tore down the existing building. The only thing we kept was the gym. We gutted the gym, refurbished it and we basically tripled the size of the Overtown Youth Center. It’s the same footprint, but we grew out of it and we just tripled the size of it.”

What does Saturday’s 20th year celebration represent for you?

Alonzo: “Well, we got a Grammy Award-winner performing in Ne-Yo, who’s one of my favorite artists. This event is going to represent and celebrate progress in our community. It’s going to celebrate progress, it’s going to hopefully create even more attention to the work what we’re doing and we want to celebrate our donors. Our donors, we want to celebrate them because we would not be where we are without our donors. So a lot of our donors are going to be there, our board members and our staff. It’s a celebration of giving, growth and progress.”