For Chad Mekles, owner/director of the well-known CMEK basketball program, sports have pretty much defined his life. Wanting to be a great athlete was a boyhood dream, but as most serious sports lovers discover over time, Chad learned early on that achieving good skills and techniques was just the tip of the iceberg for what team sports could bring to an athlete. What really made basketball larger-than-life was the great friends he made, the leadership and sportsmanship skills he acquired, and the confidence he gained. It’s these ideas and principles that ultimately led to the CMEK philosophy—and it’s Chad’s childhood pre-school and sports afterschool experiences here at the JCC that make him so excited to be bringing CMEK programming to the Kaplen JCC on the Palisades this fall.

“I grew up in Cresskill and my sister and I spent a lot of time at the J,” says Chad. “Basketball was my favorite sport and I couldn’t wait to meet my best friend, Doug, at the JCC to shoot hoops and play ball. Basketball brought us together, and to this day, Doug and I are still best friends. Over the years, I stayed really involved at the J and played a lot of sports. I also went to the Neil Klatskin Day Camp in the summer, and even worked as a counselor at Camp Dream Street, the JCC’s summer camp for kids with cancer, which was a really incredible experience. So for me, having my CMEK program at the JCC is literally like coming home.”

Chad’s connection to basketball and the JCC continued all through his teen and young adult years. In high school he played for the JCC’s Maccabi basketball team for 2 years, and ultimately went on to coach the team in 2003 when the JCC was the host site. The Games, where hundreds of Jewish teen athletes from around the world gather for an Olympic-style sporting event, proved to be a life-shaping experience for Chad.

“It’s such a grand scale sporting event! I competed at my best, made incredible friends and participated in valuable community service. I felt unbelievably proud to be a Jewish teen playing and coaching competitive basketball and I knew then that I wanted a life in sports—and that dream has come full circle for me, a dream that began and continues at the JCC.”

When Chad turned 17, his dad told him that if he wanted a car, he needed to get a job to earn it. As the JCC was already his home-away-from-home, he naturally turned there first. “I started as a scorekeeper for the JCC’s Men’s Basketball League. And then I began coaching basketball for the JCC’s afterschool youth clinics and the Marty Levitt Basketball League. It was the best—and in addition to earning me my first car—
it ultimately inspired me to establish CMEK, which is about to mark its 20th anniversary.”

Chad attended the University of Delaware and earned a degree in Marketing, but during the summer and school breaks, he ran an afterschool basketball clinic in his own backyard that grew each year from word-of-mouth referrals. That grassroots program eventually evolved into the CMEK (Confidence, Motivation, Excellence, & Knowledge) that the community knows and loves today, offering cutting-edge training throughout Bergen County.

Chad’s desire is to provide all the kids who come to train with him and his amazing team with the positive encouragement they need to set and achieve their goals. As Chad shares, “I learned those values from my coaches at the JCC when I was a kid.”

The exciting new development for me is that I’m bringing my CMEK program to the JCC, where my love of basketball began. It’s a pretty incredible feeling and I can’t wait to inspire these kids like my JCC coaches inspired me. It’s going to be an adventure filled with new friends, good sportsmanship, long-lasting memories, and a whole lot of great basketball fun!

At CMEK we teach and have fun; we offer structure and freedom, we nurture and we compete. Knowing that every player has different strengths and weaknesses, we organize our programs by placing kids in groups where everyone is challenged, gains a positive experience, and learns and improves in his or her own way.”

As it turns out, Chad’s life has come full circle in more ways than one, as both his business and his marriage have JCC connections. Chad met his wife Erica, who is now a lawyer with the K&L Gates firm in Newark, when he drove his first car—yes, the one he earned working at the JCC when he was 17—to a party in Tenafly that Erica just happened to be attending on a trip in from Florida. They liked each other enough to remain friends through college, but as fate would have it, they happened to re-meet in 2007 when Chad took a trip to Florida.

This time, it was kismet. They fell in love and married, and just bought a house in Tenafly, less than a mile from the house where they first met. Their daughter, Sylvie, is attending the Leonard and Syril Rubin Nursery School at the JCC, just like her dad once did; and their one-year-old, Harley, will be doing the same in the very near future.

“Who would have ever thought that my CMEK coaches would be teaching basketball where I learned the game myself, or that I’d be raising a family, where my daughter attends school in the same classrooms I did. It feels really weird and so incredibly great and right at the same time!”

“We are so excited to bring Chad and his incredible CMEK team here to the JCC,” adds Keri Thoren, JCC Health and Recreation Youth Director. “Chad has a long history here; he understands and shares all the core values and beliefs we look to instill in our students and we are confident that his program will add a whole new dynamic to the diverse athletic offerings we provide.”

CMEK basketball skills & drills classes begin this fall at the JCC, led by Chad and his passionate coaches who all demonstrate a superior ability to engage and instruct young athletes. Classes will include Pee Wee Basketball; Basketball Champs for Grades K-2; and Basketball Clinics for Grades 3-6. See page 4 for more information. Visit jccotp.org/basketball for more exciting details or contact Keri at 201.408-1476 or kthoren@jccotp.org.