

Bill Barnett



When he's not pastoring his congregation, Shawnee resident Bill Barnett can often be spotted throwing his javelin at a local park or running the track at Oklahoma Baptist University.

The 85-year-old minister wears many hats, including national track and field medalist.

Barnett competed with his college track and field team as a young man but lost interest for a while after graduation. It wasn't until his 50s that he began competing in the Oklahoma Senior Games and returned to the sport.

"It's one of the original sports," Barnett said. "It's a part of ancient history for me going back to the Romans and Greeks. It's a way to connect with history and a form of self-discipline and committing yourself to something."

During the past 34 years, Barnett has competed in long jump, high jump, javelin, 50 and 100 meter dashes, triple jump and four-person relay events at state and national games. He won more than 600 medals over three decades, including two national silver medals in javelin and two national gold medals in relay events. But those medals aren't on display in his home or office. They're hidden away in a plastic container that rarely sees the light of day.

"It only means something to me, not to anyone else, and it's not about seeing them every day, it's about the work you put in to get them," Barnett said.

He is proud of his medals, but it's not about winning for Barnett. He likes the competition, the camaraderie, the relationships he develops with other athletes.

Barnett's four-person relay team is made up of men from four different states that come together every couple of years for a national race and fellowship. He connects with other ministers and men of faith from around the country at these events, but after more than 30 years of competition there is still something missing.

Barnett is a member of the Muscogee Creek Nation and one of few Native American athletes that participates in the Senior Games.

He estimates that the cost of competition and cultural differences are among the barriers for recruiting more Native American participants. But that won't stop him from trying.

"We're saying that racial relationships are getting better in this country over time, but I'm not sure they are," Barnett said. "Those attitudes that come from way back, those are hard to break and I think the senior games can be a good place to work on that and to get to know each other as athletes and what we have in common instead of our differences."

Oklahoma Senior Games competitions occur annually in September and October. This year, competitions will be held in Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Shawnee, Norman, Yukon and Warr Acres.

Events include three-on-three basketball, track and field, golf, swimming, 5K and 10K runs, 5K power walk, 5K race walk, bowling, tennis, table tennis, golf croquet, shuffleboard, cycling, horseshoes, washer pitch, cornhole, badminton, archery, pickleball, racquetball, softball and triathlon. Participants age 50 and older will compete in categories by age and gender.

State games are qualifiers for the National Senior Games competitions held every two years. About 150 athletes from Oklahoma will compete in the National Senior Games in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in June. For more information visit www.okseniorgames.com or call (405) 821-1500.