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PEACE PLAYERS





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CREDITS

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FIVE CITIES: ONE CONNECTED MOVEMENT

PeacePlayers unites divided communities through the sport of basketball. In the United States historical divides driven by race and geography have created an inequitable society. We are working with our partners at Nike to develop a network of young leaders across the United States who come together across community divides and become catalysts in building a more peaceful and equitable society.

Brooklyn

Our journey to create a diverse network of youth leaders across our borough began in Brownsville, a neighborhood with so much potential that nonetheless ranks first in violent crime in Brooklyn. Many Brownsville youth do not feel comfortable in neighboring housing developments. Through PeacePlayers, young people in Brownsville and surrounding neighborhoods are accessing safe spaces where they can be themselves, in addition to quality basketball programming, and opportunities to come together to build relationships and become leaders and advocates for their community.

Baltimore

In Baltimore, the impact of decades of systemic inequity is clear as day. Historic policies such as redlining have fed modern day equivalents, such as severely inequitable municipal investments in communities of color. PeacePlayers Baltimore engages youth within these communities in different quadrants of the city with a goal of creating youth-led strategies to bridge societal divides and be a catalyst for institutional and structural change within the city.

Chicago

PeacePlayers Chicago engages youth in the Roseland/Pullman community, located on the far south side of Chicago. A once very thriving community, it is now faces many challenges, such as gun violence, bullying, poverty, school and gang violence, lack of adult supervision, racial disparities in healthcare and education, unsafe housing, and a lack of jobs and resources for young people. These disparities have fueled cultural divides among youth living in this community. PeacePlayers Chicago’s intentional programming focuses on positive youth development through the fostering of healthy relationships and by providing the support needed for youth to discover their inner leader.

Detroit

The culturally diverse Detroit metro area is home to many Arab, Latino and Bengali families, in addition to significant African American and white populations. However, segregation, lack of interaction between groups and fear across cultural and geographic divides prevents the city and many of its residents from thriving. PeacePlayers Detroit currently operates in the predominantly African American communities of Cody Rouge and Brightmoor, as well as the primarily Latino community of Southwest Detroit, with the goal of reaching all seven of the city community districts by 2024.

Los Angeles

PeacePlayers Los Angeles serves the community of Watts in South Central Los Angeles, home to four of Los Angeles’ most dangerous housing projects. While our youth participants in the Watts community are not particularly gang affiliated, they are bound by gang territory lines and live their lives navigating the conflict that encompasses their neighborhood. PeacePlayers Los Angeles aims to bridge divides in Los Angeles by creating safe spaces through the game of basketball for young people to build relationships and become leaders and advocates for their community. PeacePlayers Los Angeles currently delivers Peace League programming to Markham Middle School, working with over 300 6th and 7th graders a year. Los Angeles also launched its inaugural Jr. LDP program with 15 hand selected youth who have proven to be positive youth ambassadors and change agents within their community. These youth go through a seven-week program that meets virtually three times a week to focus on leadership development, team building as well as basketball skill sessions.



FRANK MENA HELPS PEACEPLAYERS IN BROOKLYN DISCOVER THE POWER OF VULNERABILITY



As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to threaten cities throughout the United States, at PeacePlayers, we have adapted to provide virtual programming for our young people. Each week, teammates gather on a Zoom call to touch base and participate in different activities from at-home basketball drills to conversations about remaining resilient in the face of adversity.

For some of the weekly calls, PeacePlayers teams from different cities have been able to come together, helping to show the young people involved that being a part of PeacePlayers goes beyond their individual cities.

Immediately following a recent virtual practice, which combined the PeacePlayers Brooklyn and Baltimore teams, Sally Nnamani, Director of PeacePlayers Brooklyn, received a call from Noah, one of her longtime players, to share his feedback on the practice.

“We need to talk more in these sessions,” Noah said.

These comments came as a surprise to Sally. Especially from Noah, someone who had always been shy with new people around. And, despite the presence of the newcomers to his team practice, he remained adamant that the team needed to talk more about what he described as, “personal stuff.”

He wanted his teammates to have the opportunity to open up about their lives at home. Noah and his teammates all live in Brownsville, Brooklyn, an area with the most housing projects per capita in the country. In Brownsville, many young men and women feel the need to hide their emotions behind a tough exterior to protect themselves, and Sally’s team was no different. That was, until they met Frank.

Franklyn Mena is what one could describe as a swiss army knife of wellness empowerment. Like the players on Sally’s team, he was born and raised in Brownsville. From his upbringing, Frank knows the struggle that young boys and girls go through as they navigate adolescence in Brownsville.

“My cousin was in and out of jail after he was caught with a gun. He ended up in a halfway house and when he came home he wasn’t the same and later committed suicide. He had a lot of psychological and social issues there weren’t spoken about.”

Frank realizes that many of the young people that participate in PeacePlayers Brooklyn

are dealing with similar struggles.

“The way you dress, speak, carry yourself, you might be labelled as this or that,” Frank said. “Between that and prevalent racism in society, it all affects their self-confidence.”

He talks about how guarded many of these young people are as they attempt to protect themselves from the divisiveness that they experience on a daily basis. For these reasons, Frank has dedicated his adult life towards empowering people in his community to find their calling, whatever that may be.

Frank co-founded his organization, called Universe City, with his brother and two other women. Universe City doubles as an indoor urban farm as well as a co-working space for “agriculturists, artists, activists, entrepreneurs, techies, and the curious.” He and his brother had dreamed of having their own space where people could follow their passions, and they turned that dream into Universe City.

Through a network of mutual connections, Frank ended up meeting Sally, who invited him to join PeacePlayers’ 2019 annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day event to run a session on mental health. From there, Frank came out for many PeacePlayers’ practices, where he would run sessions.

To the boys on Sally’s team, he represented a male figure who gave them the opportunity to open up and be vulnerable. To the girls, he was seen as an ally supporting them in owning who they are as people in the world and demonstrating what healthy relationships look like.

Frank has an uncanny ability to connect with the PeacePlayers youth.

“Some of the best conversations we would have were talking about fathers, mothers, grandmothers, triggers, and racism that they deal with in school.”

These topics remain particularly relevant today as Black Lives Matter protests and rallies permeate throughout hundreds of cities in the United States. Frank understood the importance of helping young people confront these societal realities and be able to open up about them.

“I’ve been advocating for Black Lives Matter and people that look like me for a while now,” Frank said. Because I think in this society black people and people of color just get lost in the sauce. Because a lot of the time we’re the laborers, we’re the servers, and those are the people who don’t always get acknowledged or have a voice in those political arenas. We don’t always have a voice in there. Institutional racism is a real thing.

“Me and Sally make sure we talk about it with our students, because racism is real. People don’t always know that they’re racists, they don’t always know they have an inkling of what their biases are. What that basically means is we have to be more prepared so that we come with facts and don’t react to certain misunderstandings that someone might approach us with.”

Sally credits these conversations with helping to bring her team closer together. Frank always told the team to “think bigger, think about joy, comfort, love” and to always be broadening their vision. Using himself as an example, he talks to them about entrepreneurship and making a difference in the community. Sally recalls Frank’s sessions having a big impact on the program.

“They allowed us to be vulnerable beyond day-to-day stuff and to see beyond that,” Sally said. “It’s extremely important for the work we are doing using basketball to bridge divides in the community. It helped us be welcoming as new people joined our team.”

One of the young people most impacted by Frank’s presence was Noah, who began to look up to Frank as though he were his big brother. At first, Noah was hesitant to open up to the group when they would dive into these deeper topics.

However, Frank helped bring Noah out of his comfort zone, to the point where Noah will call Sally up and speak for over an hour, advocating for more openness during their team practices. As such, Noah is leading by example and helping to make sure that PeacePlayers is not only a place for their team to come together and play basketball, but a place where they all feel comfortable working through life’s most challenging issues.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to devastate communities in New York and across the country, Frank and his team are working diligently to feed the Brownsville community through his urban farm. At its peak, they have delivered 2,500 to 3,000 boxes of food on a weekly basis. He describes how in Brownsville, “stores are empty, there’s nothing on the shelves.”

For his home community, Frank is providing an essential service and he’s doing what he can to help get the word out. He was recently featured in The Washington Post and on CBS This Morning.

You can get involved and support Frank and Universe City during these unprecedented times by donating to their GoFundMe called “Grow Brownsville.” All proceeds will go towards increasing Universe City’s capacity to deliver fresh, locally grown food, to the residents of Brownsville.



A SAFE SPACE NOT JUST FOR BASKETBALL, BUT FOR HEALING

What PeacePlayers provides for young people often goes far beyond just playing basketball.

On March 3, 2020, a shooting took place during an adult pickup game at Palmer Park -- on a court the kids were supposed to use later that day.

Two men who were participating in the game got into an argument that led to one of the men getting shot and killed.

Knowing the court would be used by PeacePlayers later that day, a Chicago Park District employee contacted Peace Players' Chicago director Andrea Johnson to make her aware of the tragedy.

The afternoon's basketball activities were canceled but Johnson had other decisions to make as well: How should she handle talking to the kids about what transpired? What should she and her team say about such a horrific event?

Instead of trying to sweep it under the rug and pretend it never happened, when the group gathered again a week later, Johnson and her team led a discussion about what had taken place.

"We asked if they wanted to share anything," Johnson said.

And share they did. But not immediately.

"At first, only one person spoke up," Johnson said. "But after she told a story about her uncle they just started raising their hands, one after the other. And they were talking

about family members. So we gave them that opportunity to talk. It was pretty sad for me to hear that so many of them experienced a family member, a friend that was either shot or killed."

"I mean, every one of them had a story and wanted to share. I get choked up when I think about that conversation. That kids 9, 10, 11 to 14 years old would be exposed to that. That we would have to take time out of our program to talk about that was a really difficult moment for me and my staff to listen to that."

That session didn't mark the end of the conversation.

"The following Tuesday, we talked about it again but more on a positive note," she said. "Letting them express themselves, their thoughts and feelings. We talked more about why PeacePlayers is in Roseland. So we can provide a safe place for them to play and give them access to mentors and adults they can trust. Adding some positivity and hope to the conversation."

It's that hope that Andrea is determined to instill in these kids no matter where they go in life. Just like Andrea had when she was a young girl growing up in Roseland.

"The thing that keeps me going, that charges my battery, is seeing them laugh and play and have fun," she said. "Interacting with each other. They're safe, they feel comfortable. That's the biggest thing."

ANDREA JOHNSON: LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

As a child, Andrea Johnson's days and nights growing up in Roseland were filled with the sounds and sights of sport.

Not many days went by without baseball, basketball or some other physical activity nourishing her body and soul. So it's no surprise that Johnson, the manager of PeacePlayers' Chicago, chose to devote her life to giving children the same dreams and memories.

"The thing that keeps me going, that charges my battery, is seeing kids laugh and play and have fun," she said.

Andrea was raised on 112th Street between Wentworth and State St. in an environment full of sports and, well, a lot of boys. Her two brothers challenged her daily, which helped when she discovered that the only basketball team at Curtis Elementary School was an all-boys team. So that's the one she joined.

When Andrea first began to find a world outside of Roseland, she was just 14. Instead of going to Julian, she was accepted at Whitney Young High School, and her parents insisted she attend.

Basketball led her to Florida's Palm Beach Community College for two memorable seasons -- she played on a powerhouse team with former WNBA MVP Yolanda Griffith -- then back to the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) to finish up her college career and earn a degree in kinesiology.

It was at UIC that Andrea's love for helping young people began to develop. One of her professors brought the class to Englewood to work with at-risk kids twice a week. They would take them on field trips, plan activities and teach them life lessons through basketball.

Two of the boys -- Jannero and Jeremy Pargo -- made a strong impression on Andrea. They had an obvious talent for basketball but she could also see that by providing them a chance to see a world that existed beyond Englewood, they were getting a chance to expand their view of what was possible.

A few years later, while she was helping out at one of Chicago's summer basketball leagues, a young man approached Andrea.

"Someone tapped me on the shoulder," she said. "Coach Johnson!" And I turned around and it was one of the little boys. Well, he wasn't a little boy anymore. And he told me he had just been signed by the Lakers."



That man was Jannero Pargo, who is now an assistant coach with the Portland Trailblazers after playing 11 seasons in the NBA. Jeremy Pargo also reached the NBA and continues to play professionally overseas.

"From that point on I knew that basketball and what we were doing changed lives," Andrea said. "That started to instill something in me. How can I give this opportunity to other kids?"

After spending an incredibly rewarding 12 years working for Nike, Andrea made the decision to join PeacePlayers and continue her mission of helping young people. It's a responsibility she never takes for granted both as a community leader and the mother of a 13-year-old daughter.

"Kids need to have access to positive role models," she said. "Being a resource for them and being an advocate for them just makes them better people. We've been able to do that at PeacePlayers and I'm incredibly grateful for the challenge and the opportunity."



WHAT A YOUTH LED MOVEMENT MEANS TO PEACEPLAYER, MACKENZIE KYLES

In the nearly two years since Mackenzie Kyles joined PeacePlayers Detroit, she has had some unforgettable experiences and made good friends. There was the field trip to a Nike-sponsored event at the YMCA in downtown Detroit, where she met tons of people, ran an obstacle course and got to enjoy a tasty lunch from a food truck. There were the PeacePlayers U.S. Friendship Games, held in August 2019 at the Kennedy Recreation Center in Detroit, where Mackenzie got to meet young people from all over the United States, as well as from some other countries.

There was getting to know Carrington Boards, a Detroit teen Mackenzie met through PeacePlayers before COVID shut down in-person events. Carrington has been a lifeline for Mackenzie, someone she knows can text during these difficult times. “Carrington’s a really cool, fun person,” Mackenzie said.

The memories and the experiences that come with being part of PeacePlayers can come in big packages. Or they can be little moments that wouldn’t seem to make a lasting impression, yet hit home with the kids, who notice everything. This is also true for Mackenzie. At one of the first PeacePlayer basketball events she attended, Mackenzie and the other attendees were separated into groups. The girls, who were just getting to know each other, were asked to sit on the ground and were then instructed to stand up without the use of their hands.

It was up to the girls to figure out how to make it work. Mackenzie and her new friends eventually realized that to get everyone to stand up they would have to lock arms and work as a team to accomplish their goal. It was a lesson in supporting one another. These types of activities, which typically take place prior to a practice, are known as “Icebreakers” in the PeacePlayers community. And while they may not be as glamorous as a field trip to a Nike event in downtown Detroit, they stick with you.

This particular icebreaker was a moment that stuck with Mackenzie. “I remember that was really cool,” she said.

Detroit’s PeacePlayers program began in the communities of Southwest Detroit and Cody Rouge before expanding to Brightmoor in 2019, which is where Mackenzie joined in. When she attended her first event, she was one of only three girls there. That group has expanded to nearly two dozen kids in Brightmoor alone.

The onset of COVID shut down in-person basketball events in March, but the

cohesiveness of the group was already established by then. When PeacePlayers held a virtual summer camp in July, Mackenzie and other girls participated with the same vigor as if they were on the basketball court.

“PeacePlayers helped me learn leadership skills which really helps a lot in basketball and in life.”

“But with basketball, because I’m point guard, I have to be a leader. And I have to be the one that calls the plays and tells my teammates where to go. So I feel like it really helped me in that area.”

Teaching young people how to become leaders is one of PeacePlayers’ core missions. Mackenzie loves and appreciates what she has learned but she also has the wisdom to understand the seeds were already planted long ago.

“I feel like it was always inside me,” she said. “I have always liked talking to people. So I feel like I just really need to let PeacePlayers bring it out of me. But I feel like I’ve always been a leader.”



A COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP AT THE HEART OF PEACEPLAYERS BALTIMORE



Gail Danik has witnessed enough good intentions from adults wanting to help the kids at Baltimore’s Dawson Safe Haven Center to know that some are real and some end up falling short.

All of them need to be taken with an appropriate level of suspicion.

“You have a lot of people coming through talking about what they can do and what they will do,” said Danik, who serves as the director of Dawson. “But sometimes it doesn’t pan out. I will never expose my children to anything that I don’t think would benefit them as they grow into young adults.”

Danik’s understandable caution was firmly in place during the summer of 2019 when she first met with PeacePlayers Baltimore Director LaToya Fisher to discuss the possibility that some of the PeacePlayers staff could assist at Dawson.

It turned out to be a wonderful fit from the very beginning. Danik immediately recognized the commitment that PeacePlayers brought to working with the local teens and pre-teens who often spend several hours a day at Dawson after school.

While the physical skills they work on are centered around basketball, that’s just a portion of what the kids get out of it. Danik was excited to see how the kids learned about leadership, dealing with peer pressure and how to combat bullying, among other vital topics.

“We always have an obligation to make sure that whatever service comes in that we believe in it,” Danik said. “The first time I interviewed them and was talking about what they would be able to provide our children with, I was impressed. It’s one thing to be impressed verbally, it’s another to actually see how it works.”

“You have people that talk a good game but don’t produce. And I’ve had that and I’ve seen that and I’ve stopped it. But with PeacePlayers, I see their true commitment in regard to wanting to be involved, wanting to be a part of the life of the child, even after hours. I see that commitment.”

The Dawson Safe Haven Center was born out of a terrible tragedy nearly 20 years ago. On Oct. 16, 2002, seven people -- including Angela Dawson, her husband and their five children -- were killed when their house burned down. It was soon discovered to be a case of arson.

Angela Dawson had called police to complain about neighborhood drug dealers, and one of them learned about it and firebombed their home. Local leaders decided to honor the family by building a community center on the site of the home, and it has turned into a thriving facility that has expanded with a second center nearby the original one.

Danik said the COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on services, and she has made sure to accommodate the changing needs of the residents. She’s been able to do it with the help of four PeacePlayers coaches whose presence has made a world of difference.

“There is, of course, a social distancing aspect,” Danik said. “They take the kids through drills. And they also have an opportunity to just kind of talk to the kids in general. How is their day? How are they doing? I’ve heard a coach say, ‘Hey, how’s it going with your social distance from your buddies?’ The coaches are, in fact, relating the times to what the children are experiencing. Because we have to.”

Danik has been particularly touched by Fisher’s assistance in training the coaches, working with students and doing whatever was necessary to provide a stable environment for the kids at Dawson.

“LaToya physically came in, ran the skills, talked with the kids, taught leadership,” Danik said. “Of course, myself and a couple more people to help until she was able to get the coaches that she was providing me with now. But she was here for me.”

Which is something that Danik will never forget.

“It really takes a special person to work with children,” Danik said. “Because you realize the impact that you’re making on a life as to what you’re saying and what you’re doing. And I think with PeacePlayers, they got it. They understand this.”



PEACEPLAYERS AND NIKE EMPOWERING CARRINGTON BOARDS TO INSPIRE MORE GIRLS



Pretty soon the young girl was making baskets. And soon after that she was no longer alone.

“At the end of practice she was playing with everybody,” Carrington said. “I thought that was really cool.”

Carrington isn’t done helping young girls develop a love for basketball and all athletics. With the help of Nike, she’s just getting started.

In January, Carrington was invited to Nike headquarters in Beaverton, Oregon, to participate in Game Growers, an initiative they started which is designed to increase girls’ access to sports. Carrington’s program, which she created with her partner, Macey, is called Girls Got Game 4 Life.

The idea is to provide a 10-week summer program for girls to gain skills in a sport so that they can keep playing it during the school year. The program covers registration fees, transportation and even goes so far as to offer tutoring for girls who are in need of extra academic help.

Carrington and the rest of the six dozen girls attending Game Growers were given the VIP treatment the entire weekend. It was hard for her to decide which part was the coolest.

It may have been having her name and idea posted for all to see. Or it could have

been when all the parents were lined up inside Nike headquarters cheering for their daughter. Then again, it might have been the shoes, backpack and clothes they were given during their stay.

“It was really fun and exciting,” she said. “We were doing a lot of different drills and different ways we can improve our program. And it was just cool. I never, ever thought I would ever go to Nike headquarters. That wasn’t something that would even pop in my brain.”

After attending Game Growers, Carrington returned to Detroit, and in February, ran a test pilot of the program. It offered basketball and soccer to 15 girls and was everything Carrington hoped it would be.

“I’m really proud of it,” she said. “I feel like when I play basketball with boys they sometimes discriminate against you because you’re a girl even though they don’t know what your ability is. You can be really good and they still wouldn’t pick you. And I’ve experienced that before. It takes them a minute to see how you can play and then they’ll let you on their team. But it shouldn’t be like that.

“I feel like a lot of girls don’t like playing sports because they may play with boys and feel discouraged. I like that I could do this program because it’s something that I believe in.”

Carrington was supposed to visit Israel this summer and participate in PeacePlayers’ Global Friendship Games but it was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A virtual event took place over the summer that, while perhaps not as exciting as an overseas adventure, created opportunities to meet new people around the world. She’s even stayed in contact with one girl who lives in Northern Ireland.

But Carrington’s heart is still in Detroit. It’s there where she overcame her youthful shyness to become a role model for young girls who love sports. And she has a message for any of them who think sports aren’t for them.

“I want them not to give up,” Carrington said. “Even though someone might say, ‘Oh, you’re girl, you can’t do it.’ Girls can do it. Girls can do as much as boys can do.”

And often much, much more.



HOW PEACEPLAYERS BROUGHT THIS LOS ANGELES COACH BACK TO GRASS ROOTS

Earl Ramsey looks back at the 16-year-old version of himself and freely admits he would have been skeptical about PeacePlayers.

Well, more than skeptical. That young man, stubborn and already starting to get stuck in his ways, wouldn't have viewed it as an opportunity to be relished.

Part of that came from Earl needing to step up and help raise his younger brothers when his father became sick. But most of it came from the circumstances of becoming too cynical at too early an age, the result of growing up on the tough streets of South Central.

Earl, now 29 and a PeacePlayers Los Angeles coach for the last two years, shakes his head at the idea that kids would pass up on a chance to receive free basketball training from wonderful mentors who get up every morning looking to make a difference in the lives of young people.

"Talking to a kid I would be selling without selling," Earl said. "I would just tell them all the things we do. And I would just encourage them to not miss out and give it a shot. I'm not gonna make you come. But I'm telling you, you want to do this."

For much of the last decade, Earl has devoted his life to building a business training professional and college basketball players. But he's never strayed far from a passion for connecting with the kind of young person needing guidance that he was not so long ago.

After helping out for several years at Downtown Magnets High School in a program where sports wasn't a big focus, Earl was introduced to PeacePlayers in 2019 by PeacePlayers Los Angeles Program Coordinator San Dixon. The significant basketball component was exciting to him but so was a curriculum that not only allowed improvising with the kids but encouraged it.

Case in point: PeacePlayers LA began doing takeovers of PE. classes at Markham Middle School before the Covid-19 pandemic started, but when the schools went to remote learning, things became trickier. When a kid is standing right in front of you, they don't have the option of hitting their mute button.

That's what Tiffany, a student at Markham, would do as soon as possible during class. Earl quickly noticed this and created a game to bring her back into the fold without making it embarrassing for her.

Earl dubbed the game he invented, "What are you talking about?" and it involved Earl asking a question to the group and requiring everyone to unmute themselves and answer a question, such as what's your favorite cereal? The game became so popular that students began to request it and became a regular icebreaker to begin the Zoom calls.

"I felt like it'd be fun," Earl said. "Tiffany is quiet, but she's not shy once she's comfortable. She comes off as shy and quiet for so long. I just kind of kept poking at her to get her to open up a little bit. And I noticed she muted herself every time we would get on. We have responsibility of bringing an icebreaker. PeacePlayers does a fantastic job at laying out certain icebreakers that we can do."

While the foundation was set by PeacePlayers, it was Earl who discovered the game that brightened the day for Tiffany and many of the students.

"Instead of Earl looking at Tiffany muting herself as a negative, he noticed and turned it into a positive thing," Program Coordinator San Dixon said. "Letting Tiffany know that she was the inspiration behind it was a great moment for him and Tiffany and just shows how he connects with kids."

In addition to being a doting father to his newborn daughter, Earl devotes much of his personal and professional life to GAGE (God and Grind Everyday), an organization he founded whose name comes from the street he grew up on, his faith and a determination to never give up.

Earl is building a life in basketball at the same time his younger brother, Deveal, is completing his senior season at UC-Santa Barbara, where he's started 65 of 66 games over the last three seasons. The pride he has for his family and his business are inexorably intertwined.

"Taking my street name and turning it into an acronym to make it positive was the goal behind GAGE," Earl said. "Because I felt like that message was what saved me. It saved both of my brothers and just the people that are in situations like we were in. I felt like they can have the same motivation."

Earl isn't afraid to use his connections to bring some light to some of the kids in PeacePlayers. When a boy showed up one day wearing Jayson Tatum's Celtics jersey, Earl shot Tatum a text to let him know and Tatum responded with a video for the boy, thanking him for the love and support. It was a special moment for both teacher and student.

It's times like those when Earl recognizes the impact he's having on young people and why the decision to partner with PeacePlayers was both life-changing and life-affirming.

"PeacePlayers kind of... kind of attacks the root of the things that I believe in," Earl said. "It's so easy to get caught up in our schedule. You start getting an NBA client and a college client and they become priority because they're connected to the goal that I want set for myself."

"PeacePlayers brought me back to grass roots. A kid with no basketball experience. So it's little things like that which reminds me this is why you do this."



HOW FEMALE ROLE MODELS ARE CHANGING THE GAME IN BROOKLYN



The event on the basketball court at Nike headquarters in midtown Manhattan began, as they typically do, with the young women excitedly talking to one another and taking a few warm-up shots.

Then something happened that wasn't so typical. A song by rapper Pop Smoke started blasting over the loudspeaker. The players stopped what they were doing, and a pre-game shootaround turned into a spontaneous and raucous dance session.

Nike Community Ambassador Allie Moogan, drawn in by the joy she was witnessing, quickly joined in and became part of this wonderful moment that she hasn't forgotten.

"It was a super fun thing to do before everything started," Moogan said.

Moogan, 23, is one of many Nike Community Ambassadors who has built a close relationship with PeacePlayers and the kids who depend on it for support and guidance. While all the volunteers have made an impact, Moogan's magnetic and vivacious personality has stood out since she first began to donate her time over two years ago.

Sally Nnamani, U.S. Director of Programs & Partnerships at PeacePlayers, enlisted Moogan to speak the first time she came to an event. Moogan spoke from the heart, as she always does, but away from the microphone something else was happening.

"There were so many volunteers there that day, and Allie was the one person that the kids remembered," Nnamani said. "Between the two schools that we work with, Allie's the name that will come up. And so I think that just speaks to the passion that she brings. She is authentic and caring about working with young people. And it shows."

Moogan's decision to make basketball a key part of her adult life isn't a surprise considering it was such a big part of her youth. After playing in high school, she played all four years at Brooklyn College before graduating with a degree in business management.

Division III programs don't draw very large crowds, so Moogan would typically

play in front of a few friends, family and classmates. And little more than that. Then one day, shortly after working with PeacePlayers for the first time, she arrived at a game to find her very own cheering section.

"Brooklyn College is literally down the block from the Nike Flatbush store. So a lot of the same girls that I saw at the Nike PeacePlayers event went to my game. They were just like, okay, we're gonna watch Allie play. And then they brought their high school friends who weren't in the actual PeacePlayers program but they wanted to come watch someone that they knew play basketball. I felt like I had fans. I felt so happy."

Moogan recognizes the impact she can have on the lives of the girls in the PeacePlayers program and wants to be a role model for them even if their backgrounds aren't entirely the same. Having people like her involved supports and advances the work PeacePlayers is doing within the community.

"A lot of our girls do not have interactions with white people on a daily basis," Nnamani said. "And the ones they have interaction with are teachers and people in positions of power. And so that relationship may not always be authentic. I think the experience they have with Allie is, this is somebody who is like their older sister. Even though she's white, she is someone they can see themselves getting along with."

"What Allie is doing is so cool because it fits with the work we're doing in Brooklyn engaging communities and housing developments. As our program gets stronger and grows, we want to start looking at racial divides and how we're creating space for black and white young people from different parts of Brooklyn, who are residing in different neighborhoods because of their socio-economic status, to get together."

As a Nike employee, Moogan has the best of both worlds. She earns her living with an established company she deeply admires and hopes to work with for a long time, while also helping to grow PeacePlayers. The two organizations are both dedicated to using sport to bridge divides between communities.

"The PeacePlayers mission statement is probably my favorite mission statement," Moogan said. "Even close to Nike. It's something that I live by every day because I try my best to be someone who is authentic with everybody and try to bring communities together, bring people together. Whether it's the Brooklyn community, a community in Cyprus, in South Africa, whatever the case may be, that same mission statement doesn't change. I think that's how

the world should be. It should be the same mission statement and just relate differently in each community."

That knowledge that PeacePlayers is working towards helping young people on a grand scale is an essential part of the program. But it only works because people like Moogan are making a huge difference with individuals, one person at a time.

"I try my best to be super down to earth with these girls," she said. "And I think that shows through in how I act towards them and how I act within myself that I do give off the older sister kind of vibe. I do want them to feel comfortable with me because they might not have many interactions with white women like myself."

"Being a constant person who they can go to, who they can dance with in the middle of a court without having to wonder why she is dancing with me. It shows that me and those girls have a lot in common and having fun and being joyous in what we're doing is our top priority."



YOUTH LEAD THE WAY



Jonathan Sanchez
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PARTICIPANT

Jonathan Sanchez is a 13-year-old 8th grader who attends Thomas A. Edison Middle School. Jonathan and his family of seven have lived in LA for 13 years. His mother learned about PeacePlayers through the Salvation Army and told him about the program. Since joining, he has become a true leader in our LDP program. He not only leads with his basketball skills, but with his actions as well, leading drills and team building activities for other kids. Jonathan also participated in the 2020 Virtual Friendship Games and PeacePlayers U.S. Summer Camp.



Brianna Benjamin
GIRLS PEACE LEAGUE

Brianna is a 14-year-old PeacePlayer from Brownsville, Brooklyn, where few opportunities exist for young African American and Latina girls to participate in quality basketball programming at no cost to them or their families. PeacePlayers brings girls like Brianna together from all parts of Brownsville to participate in year-round basketball programming, teambuilding, peacebuilding and introduces them to positive female role models. As members of PeacePlayers, Brianna, her teammates and hundreds of young BIPOC youth across five U.S. cities get a tangible platform for success and the opportunity to play basketball.

“I really liked the fact that I was able to do more things that I wouldn’t normally do, and I was able to grow my confidence on and off the court with the help of my coach.”



Walter Boyd III
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PARTICIPANT

Walter joined PeacePlayers Chicago in January 2019, after being recruited by Coach Franklin. Walter is a skilled athlete but had issues with controlling his temper. He would often get angry and had a very bad attitude at times. “I joined PeacePlayers around the time my mom was dealing with breast cancer. I closed everybody out around that time,” Walter shares.

At 15, Walter is the oldest participant in the program, and also our best player, so the other kids always looked up to him. However, they did not like his bad attitude. Walter came to programming almost every session and his behavior began to improve. “When I got to PeacePlayers, I could open back up. PeacePlayers is more than basketball it’s a family.” And Walter knows a thing or two about family, having eight siblings three of whom have also joined PeacePlayers.

We selected Walter to participate in the first U.S. Regional Friendship Games, which took place in Chicago and Detroit and 2019. This experience was a game changer for Walter.

“I’ve learned leadership skills and to be open minded about everything. My most memorable moment was the time when we were playing a 5 on 5 and Coach Johnson sat me down because of my attitude and from that day on I realized PeacePlayers is bigger than basketball -, it’s a family, an organization trying to bring better things to not only Roseland but the city of Chicago.”



Carrington Boards
NIKE GAME GROWER

Carrington joined PeacePlayers after being homeschooled throughout her life. When she joined PeacePlayers Detroit, she was quiet and reserved. She was not accustomed to spending so much time around kids her age. Carrington reached a turning point when she attended PeacePlayers regional friendship games in 2019. She was selected to join a group of PeacePlayers youth leaders from around the country who would come together for basketball programming, relationship-building and peace education. When she returned from that experience, Carrington became a much more vocal leader around her teammates. Recently, through PeacePlayers, Carrington has had the opportunity to join the Game Growers initiative. In partnership with Nike, the WNBA, and NBA, Carrington is helping to create “Girls Got Game 4 Life,” an initiative that increases girls’ access to sports. Carrington is not only a leader on her team, but since joining PeacePlayers, has become a leader in her community working to address inequity and gender equality at large.

“This past January, I went to Nike World headquarters in Beaverton, Oregon, because Coach Jasmine told me that Nike was looking for girls to start an all-girls sports program because girls drop out of sports by the age 13. This gave me a chance to help other girls with something I love to do.”



Mackenzie Kyles

“PeacePlayers helped me learn leadership skills, which really helps a lot in basketball and in life,” Mackenzie said. “But with basketball, because I’m a point guard, I have to be a leader. And I have to be the one that calls the plays and tells my teammates where to go. So I feel like it really helped me in that area.”

Mackenzie Kyles has been one of PeacePlayers Detroit’s most engaged participants since Covid-19 forced a shift to virtual programming. Initially tapped as one of 4 youth to represent Detroit in Israel at the 2020 Friendship Games, she was disappointed to learn that in-person games would not be feasible due to the global pandemic. When PeacePlayers made the shift to an online friendship games format, Mackenzie went all in to make the best of the experience. Her virtual engagement has given her a leg up as she has begun the 9th grade at Cass Tech (Detroit’s most prestigious high school), doing all online classes.

OUT OF HER COMFORT ZONE, SARII GAINS THE CONFIDENCE TO LEAD



As anyone who has spent some time hanging around PeacePlayers Chicago knows, Sarribel (known to her friends and coaches as Sari) has never been one to back down from a challenge. She joined PeacePlayers in the fall of 2018 as an 8th grader. Since becoming a PeacePlayer, Sari has made a name for herself on the defensive end of the basketball court. Always seeking out some of the more experienced boys in practice to guard, she's known for playing very physical defense and making it incredibly difficult for them to get open, let alone score. Not one for many words, Sari carries herself with a quiet confidence that can be felt by participants and coaches alike.

Maybe that confidence and gamesmanship is a result of Sari's background. Although she started at PeacePlayers with almost no experience in playing basketball, she had plenty of experience with other sports, growing up playing soccer, softball, and even boxing. The latter, combined with the fact that she has older brothers, might explain why her coach, PeacePlayers' Chicago Manager Andrea Johnson, describes her as "tough as nails." As a multi-sport athlete with limited experience in basketball, Sari found her comfort playing defense against some of the best players in the program; however she never quite felt comfortable shooting the ball – something her coaches and friends in Chicago knew about her.

Sari would go game after game without putting up a shot. However, she reached a turning point during her first summer playing with PeacePlayers. In 2019, she was selected to participate in PeacePlayers' first-ever regional U.S. Friendship Games. This event brought together youth leaders across each of PeacePlayers' five U.S. sites for a week of on- and off-court leadership and teambuilding in Detroit and Chicago. Sari took the opportunity to explore new communities and to meet her peers from other PeacePlayers' programs as they learned from one another to grow as leaders.

Throughout the week, as competitions ensued, Sari played on various teams mixed with players from new cities. Her teammates did not necessarily know that Sari only thought of herself as a defensive player and had no interest in shooting the ball. So, when Sari had an open shot in front of her in one game that week, all of her new teammates were encouraging her to put up the shot. As her coach Andrea looked on, she remembers thinking to herself "Good luck, I've been trying to get her to shoot the basketball for months!"

There must have been something unique about this support of other youth from around the country that inspired Sari in that moment. After a week of building confidence and friendships, coming to understand the similarities and bonds that they all share, regardless of their backgrounds, a switch must have flipped. Sari felt empowered to shoot the ball. When she made her first basket, and her teammates from Chicago and from around the country went crazy for her, you could truly feel the impact of PeacePlayers' movement of youth leaders supporting one another.

Sometimes, even the most fearless 8th grade girl needs that extra help, and in that moment, her PeacePlayers teammates provided it to her.

This experience of feeling supported by a group of peers has inspired Sari to become a role model to others. She is learning what it means to become a leader and to help inspire others in her own community to overcome fear and bridge divides. Upon her return to practice in Chicago, this 14-year-old girl, who never backed down from a challenge, gave herself one more by moving out of her comfort zone.

While she had mostly been known for her quiet demeanor in her early months at PeacePlayers, Sari has since taken on a new mentality. She has decided to take it upon herself to help out the younger players and encourage them. Her coaches began noticing that she has been doing warm up drills and layup lines with players years younger than herself. She is now routinely seen talking to younger kids, making sure they feel comfortable and confident at practice.

Sari has also started encouraging other kids from her school to come out to practice and learn what it means to be a part of PeacePlayers. Before practice starts, she can be found pulling some of the newer participants to the side, working on dribbling techniques or shooting drills to help make sure they feel included. Sari was never asked by her coaches to take on this new role, she has stepped up on her own to make sure others feel included.

In these last few, short months, Sari has been developing her own self confidence on and off the basketball court to become a leader in her Chicago community. Her coach, Andrea, is very proud of her and how she is now extending her leadership to help bring her peers together from across the community to remove the distrust and fear of differences that exist. She shows that through the power of sport we learn that we are all more alike than we are different.

Before the global pandemic of COVID-19 led to widespread restrictions and lockdowns, in that spirit of community, Sari, Andrea and others from across the Chicago community gathered at Pullman Community Center to celebrate Martin Luther King's legacy as one of five celebrations happening across the country that weekend. As Dr. King once said, "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'" Our PeacePlayers' MLK weekend events in Chicago and nationwide are an opportunity to remember his life and legacy and recommit ourselves to serve one another and our communities.

Thanks to young leaders like Sari, other young people can be inspired to reach out and help the people around them, continuing the cycle of positive actions in the community.

Sari is just one example of why we cannot help but be inspired by so many of our PeacePlayers' young leaders around the country, showing that they can do their part to make an impact on the world around them.



PEACEPLAYERS UNITED STATES FALL VIRTUAL GIRLS SUMMIT

PeacePlayers Detroit's Barbara and PeacePlayers Brooklyn's Diamond reflect on their experience at the PeacePlayers National Girls Summit last Fall

Bringing young people together to learn from coaches and one another has always been a key part of the PeacePlayers core mission.

Sometimes, obstacles can get in the way of that mission. Like, say, during a Global Pandemic.

But time and time again over the last year, we have adapted to our new -- and hopefully, temporary -- reality by making adjustments and keeping true to our mission, even if it's over Zoom calls instead of on the basketball court.

In the fall of 2020, PeacePlayers launched the Fall Girls Virtual Summit, a 5-week virtual program involving girls and coaches in PeacePlayers' five U.S. sites: Baltimore, Brooklyn, Chicago, Detroit and Los Angeles.

Over five consecutive Saturdays, each site took a turn hosting the Summit, where girls from across the country got to explore a different topic each week. The summit reached 20+ girls every Saturday, and it was designed and led by a team of PeacePlayers women coaches from across the country.

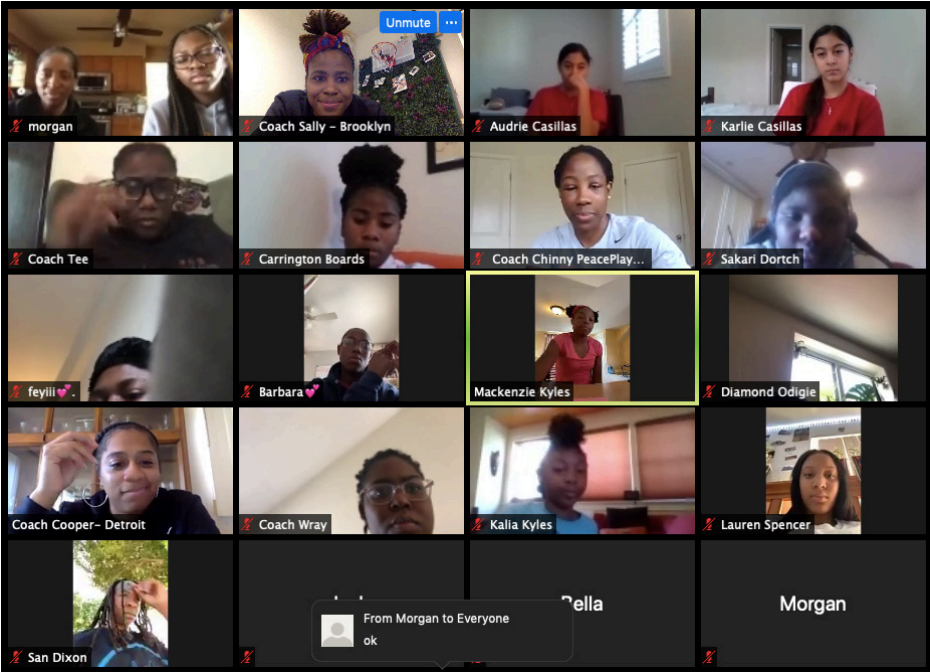
The five topics: "Who am I? Developing my voice," "Challenging societal norms", "Team building", "Women empowerment" and "A Woman in Your Life (highlighting personal role models)."

Two of the girls -- Brooklyn's Diamond Odigie and Detroit's Barbara Age shared some of their thoughts from each of those five memorable Saturdays.

WHO AM I? DEVELOPING MY VOICE *(led by PeacePlayers Baltimore)*

The first topic resonated strong with Diamond (pictured left), an eighth grader who described herself as someone who was slowly but surely coming out of her shell since joining PeacePlayers.

"Something that I remember from that day was we were talking about how



we develop as a person," Diamond said. "And to me I was just thinking how I didn't just develop through the experience I had with PeacePlayers but how I developed generally when I was playing basketball.

"I think PeacePlayers provided a comfortable space where I get to talk with other girls who I somewhat felt like I related to and like I could connect to as well."

Barbara's takeaway was remarkably similar to that of Diamond. Neither girl felt they came into the program as a wallflower fearful of the world, but both understood how helpful it can be to describe your confident and true self.

"We were talking about how to be more bold in what you say," Barbara said. "I always could speak, but I didn't have a lot of confidence behind what I was saying. I saw how all the coaches spoke with power that day. They know what they're talking about and they want to get their point across. So it showed me how to be more bold with what I'm saying and put a little power behind my speech and whatever I'm saying."

CHALLENGING SOCIETAL NORMS *(led by PeacePlayers Brooklyn)*

Gender-based discrimination is hard to avoid for any young woman, especially those who love athletics.

When the topic was presented, Barbara knew it was something she needed to embrace and overcome.

"It was explained to me that just because society says one thing, that doesn't mean you can't do something else," she said. "You don't have to follow the norm of society. You can break it."

The weekend helped dispel the notion girls aren't as strong, determined or talented as boys.

"It upsets me a little bit, because I know that we probably have a little bit more talent than the boys," she said.

Diamond loved how the discussion created a desire within her and the other girls to keep striving to do their best in whatever endeavors they pursue. Breaking the glass ceiling in sports and elsewhere in society -- Sarah Thomas was the first female official to work a Super Bowl this year while Kamala Harris became the first female Vice President of the United States -- is burning within her.

"That day we were really talking about how society separates guys and girls from activities like sports," Diamond said. "How girls are underestimated and people don't think that we're really capable of doing better than guys. And in a way I felt like society's norms even pushes growth, like me and other girls who are part of the program even harder to do their best. And not just in basketball. Everything in general."

TEAM BUILDING *(led by PeacePlayers Los Angeles)*

The main activity during team building had girls split into different teams and play a game of Family Feud. It was a great example of how PeacePlayers goes beyond basketball to create the right environment to teach young people strong values that they will carry with them into adulthood.

"It was basically uplifting each other and being able to communicate with each other," Diamond said. "And not just with basketball but it also taught us how to



communicate with each other outside of basketball in society as well.”

Focusing on teamwork and support didn’t mean competitiveness was thrown out the window.

“I think we lost,” Barbara said. “But I really thought that we should have won.”

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT (led by PeacePlayers Detroit)

The fourth Saturday included a video of Grey’s Anatomy creator Shonda Rhimes giving a commencement speech a few years ago at Dartmouth, her alma mater.

There is great power in seeing people who look like you achieving great things.

“Her story was very inspiring to me,” Diamond said. “And not just as a girl but a black woman in society as well.”

Barbara soaked in the message that the highest levels of success aren’t reserved for one particular group of people. But she also took in Rhimes’ words about how she achieved her success, which involved a whole lot of trying and a whole lot of failure.

“She was talking about how she failed and then she finally got it,” Barbara said. “And sometimes when you fail, you feel like, you’re not going to be able to make it but you got to keep pushing until you do.”

Failure? It’s just another part of the road to success.

“It’s not hard to understand that,” she said. “But it’s hard to believe it.”

A WOMAN IN YOUR LIFE (led by PeacePlayers Chicago)

The final Saturday of the Summit became a little more personal.

Each girl was asked to create a vision board focusing on important women in their lives. Diamond proudly spoke up about two special women: her sisters.

“That day was good for me,” Diamond said. “I talked about how I felt inspired by my two sisters, my eldest and my youngest sister. Because they had a great impact in my life as well. And how it was able to let me see something outside

life, like gears deeper, because my sisters always have been there for me. They’re always very supportive with everything that I choose to do and who I am.”

One of the women who made a mark on Barbara was WNBA player Reshanda Gray, who spoke about being raised in poverty and being put into foster care.

“I really enjoyed her speech because she was telling us how she came from nothing and how she used to live in the ‘hood of LA,” Barbara said. “She was great. She showed that no matter where you come from or what happened in your childhood, you can still be great. Don’t let that define you.”

That’s a message Barbara, Diamond and the other young women who took place in the Summit won’t soon forget.



RAISING AWARENESS AND FUNDS FOR PEACEPLAYERS **ONE PEDAL AT A TIME**



Leo Walsh has a deep appreciation for America's beauty; it's a big reason why he chose to hop on his bicycle for three months and take a 3,500-mile trek across the country.

But what's at the center of his attention is not always the lush landscape and rolling hills.

What might be invisible to most people is plainly evident to Walsh, whose passion for basketball – and for PeacePlayers International – has led him on a journey of a lifetime.

A major part of the trip, which began on Aug. 4 in his hometown of Clarks Green, Pennsylvania, and ended in mid-October on the fabled courts of Venice Beach, California, was a search for degraded basketball hoops ravaged by time.

"I always have my head on a swivel using my peripheral vision while I'm biking," says Walsh. "There are times that I have a sense that an old barn coming up might have a hoop on the other side of it. Then I pass it and to my delight there is a beautiful battered old hoop."

Walsh, 28, walked onto the basketball team while attending college at Fordham and developed a friendship with teammate Ryan Hage, who had spent two years in Cyprus working for PeacePlayers. Enamored with the mission of PeacePlayers, Walsh hoped to do similar work but he joined an ecommerce company after finishing college and the timing was never right.

Until now. All the money Walsh raised during his bike trip was donated to PeacePlayers.

"What PeacePlayers is at its core is exposing kids to cultures and customs and people that you might not be used to," Walsh said. "It pushes your boundaries of what you're comfortable with and when you're exposed to those things at a young age, it breeds empathy and friendship and goodness."

"I think PeacePlayers' initiative of play together, live together is just so simple and so true. If you can learn to play basketball together and you can be exposed to the different aspects of different cultures and religions and beliefs, then I think it will create empathy and goodness and, I think, a better world."

Walsh wanted to start his trip in the spring of 2020 but the pandemic altered his plans. This gave him time to reflect on turmoil in the world, which only grew worse when the killing of George Floyd increased attention on racial injustice.

"I remember writing things down during the early days of the pandemic that we need to invest in our communities and invest in our kids because that's what's going to change things," Walsh said. "And that kind of comes from a grassroots level."

"For me as someone ... who would like to make a difference and who was planning on biking across the country it only made sense that this was one of the things I can do to make a slight change. PeacePlayers was on my radar for a while and I just believe so fully in their philosophy."

Over the first two weeks of his trip, Walsh already found and photographed dozens of hoops, which he chronicled on Instagram and on his blog at peachbaskets.net.

This is not the first time he's scoured the continent for old hoops, though the last time he had the benefit of an engine and four wheels instead of his legs and two. Walsh drove 14,000 miles all around North America in 2019 with a similar mission to find hoops and tell their stories through photography and talking to the people whose land – or barns – they reside on.

While riding through the Blue Ridge Parkway in Virginia he noticed an old hoop and stopped to take some photos. The home belonged to an elderly African-American woman who just happened to pull into her driveway at the moment Walsh pulled up.

He asked for and received permission to photograph the hoop and also inquired about its history. Turns out the woman's granddaughter had lived with her until she was 16 and adored shooting baskets. The granddaughter liked it so much she wouldn't hesitate to chase after the basketball when a missed shot would disappear into nearby bushes.

The problem? The bushes left her legs so beat up her teachers grew concerned something was amiss at home.

"They called child services," Walsh said. "And she had to bring them back to the house and prove that the scars were coming from the daughter going and fetching the ball from the bushes."

It's these stories that Walsh knows are out there which he craves to tell.

"I love the thought of me taking a picture of something that no one has thought to take a picture of," he said. "If it means something to me, it may mean something to other basketball lovers."

Walsh had to travel light to make sure he could get through dozens of miles each day but he was equipped with essentials: A tent, clothes, a camera and a basketball that had a PeacePlayers decal on it.



While bicycling through the southern parts of Illinois, David Cassel, Head of Strategy and Operations at PeacePlayers U.S., made a trip from Chicago to meet up with Leo for the first time. David got a taste of Leo's new daily reality when he stayed with Leo, not in Leo's usual fashion of a tent, but in a stranger's home, graciously offered to them through a special platform that matches cross-country bicyclists with beds and warm showers. David and Leo hosted a Live event on Instagram, where hundreds of Leo's supporters from across the country tuned in, offering praise and encouragement.

The days were long and could be arduous, but he amazingly finished his nearly three month journey in Venice Beach, California in mid-October. Our PeacePlayers Los Angeles staff members, Sha Frye and San Dixon, met him at the finish line in celebration! The whole event was broadcasted live on Instagram, where Leo shared statistics of his journey including; a total distance traveled of 3500 miles, enduring five busted tires, and tons of road kill, and consuming lots of Clif Bars, donuts, and McGriddles to get him through.

Leo ended the live broadcast with some last words, in hope of inspiring others to support PeacePlayers and the mission of peace and equity; "The main thing I wanted to get out of the trip was to raise money and awareness for PeacePlayers. I believe so fully in what [this organization] does. I've loved basketball my whole life and when I found out, through Ryan Hage, about what you do; bringing kids together to create peace through the sport that I love, it made sense to do the small part that I can ... We need to invest in our kids, our youth, and our communities."

Thank you, Leo!



PEACE PLAYERS

BUILDING A GLOBAL
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