



PEACE PLAYERS
UNITED STATES



2021
UNITED STATES
Storybook

DEAR FRIENDS,

We are delighted to share with you the remarkable 2021 stories from our PeacePlayers community. This year's edition is special as we highlight participants' unique journeys to PeacePlayers — how they are introduced to PeacePlayers, what made them join, and why they stayed involved. We are especially proud of our impact in the past year: safely returning 750 youth across our five cities to in-person programming.

Our growing movement is special because of the people who live and embrace our core values: Seeing People as People, Inside Out Transformation, and Culture of Collaboration. Together we will make society a more peaceful and equitable place. Our stakeholders, our young PeacePlayers and their families, our team, and our partners are excited to share some of our stories with you.

In closing I would like to express our deep appreciation for our founding partner, Nike, and other key supporters of our work: NBPA, Laureus, Beyond Sport, and the NBA Foundation. Their belief in and support of our work and dedication to long-term systemic change through the power of sport have been foundational to our continued impact across the country.

Thank you,

SALLY NNAMANI

Director of US Programs and Partnerships



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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

Like in many cities in America, Baltimore’s residents of color still experience the aftermath of redlining, the historic institutionalized disinvestment in predominantly non-white neighborhoods, a trend that unfortunately persists to this day. This institutionalized discrimination negatively impacts the opportunities available to youth in predominantly non-white neighborhoods in Baltimore. Youth in low-income neighborhoods have few opportunities for after-school activities and lack exposure to experiences outside of their local neighborhood. PeacePlayers engages youth within these communities in different parts of the city by providing access to sports-based after-school programming led by committed and effective local coaches grounded in leadership development and peace education. Youth develop the skills, attitudes, and behaviors that enhance their ability to reduce conflict in positive ways and emerge from the program as leaders uniting East and West Baltimore. Ultimately, our goal is to create youth-led strategies to bridge societal divides and be the 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 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 Watts and the South LA Community, home to four of the nation’s most dangerous housing projects. While our youth participants 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.

SEEING THE BIGGER PICTURE

If a split second more had gone by, Omarion Lewis might have walked right out the door. And with that, a big part of his future might have gone right along with it.

The then 15-year-old Brooklyn resident was hanging out with his friends at the Van Dyke Community Center when they noticed a meeting for a new organization – PeacePlayers – taking place. One of the people holding the meeting, Sally Nnamani, already knew Omarion from the center and locked eyes with him as he started to make his exit.

“I looked at Coach Sally,” Lewis said. “And she looked at me. And she was like, come on, stay. So I stayed.”

A life can change in an instant, and at that second, Omarion’s path was altered, thanks to an encouraging coach, an intuition that there was something different about PeacePlayers, and simply being in the right place at the right time. If Omarion had gone somewhere else that day or not noticed the meeting taking place, things would have been very different for him. Perhaps he would not have been selected as a scholarship recipient for the 2019 NBPA Summer Basketball Camp.

Four years later, Omarion has progressed from being a PeacePlayers LDP participant to a youth coach who is having the same kind of impact on young people that Sally, now the PeacePlayers U.S. Director of Programs and Partnerships, had on him all those years ago. It’s still hard for him to think about how different things might be if he hadn’t made that decision to stay in the meeting and get on the PeacePlayers path.

“It’d be really different,” he said. “I wouldn’t have known about what they were doing. And I’d just be going about my life not knowing what the bigger picture is.”

The big picture for Lewis is the same as it is for PeacePlayers Brooklyn,



which has fought hard to keep kids engaged during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the summer of 2021, after many months of connecting solely through Zoom calls, a resident-led summer camp was organized through the Brownsville Community Justice Center. Over 60 young people came out to two Brownsville locations – Howard Park and the Dr. Green Playground – for seven weeks of basketball, friendship and leadership training.

The camps were led by PeacePlayers Brooklyn Director Alesha Smith and Program Manager Coach Wray, but Lewis and a few of his pals – including some who were with him on that important day in 2018 – were also on hand for their first crack at coaching. The affable Omarion – easily recognizable by his cheery disposition and ever-present smile – immediately had an impact on the kids at the camp. One, in particular, stood out to him.

“There was a kid named David, when he got there he was quiet,” Lewis said. “He wasn’t really trying to interact with anybody. Then he started getting better. Started interacting with kids. He started getting better at basketball. He just seemed more outgoing. The key is to get to know him. Once you get to know him it makes them comfortable. Once they start to get comfortable they realize, “Oh, I’m here to have fun.” Once they start having fun, they’re gonna keep on having fun.”

And how did it make Omarion feel to have that impact?

“It felt good,” he said.

A humble nature and desire to deflect attention to others is part of the reason Sally eyed Omarion to join PeacePlayers four years ago. She knew that those are traits of a potential leader, and as she had watched him at the Van Dyke Center it was plain to see that Omarion’s friends viewed him as such.

“He’s one of those people that when he walks in, you know this person has influence in the group,” Sally said. “Omarion really challenged himself this summer and went from being a quiet leader to a more vocal leader. You can see it in the relationship that he has been able to develop with one the younger kids who are part of the leadership development program, and also the kids at camp this summer. He is a coach’s player. He is the voice of a coach when the coach is not in the room.”

Maybe in some way David reminded Omarion about himself. “But what I’ve seen in the last three-four years he’s been in the program is—it’s taken some time—but he’s found his voice”, Sally shares. “It’s changed his perspective of people,” she adds. He is more open-minded with new individuals, and is more intentional about when he uses his voice.

And he intends to keep using it.

“PeacePlayers is a fun, caring, safe, comfortable environment for all kids,” Omarion said. “Any age. No matter how you look, your appearance, we will welcome you as family. We have a fun way to experience things. We are here to help you with your problems. Any personal things you want to get off your chest, we’re here for that.”

RULES OF THE **GAME**

Ulijah, Javonn, Raishan and Chris have a lot in common. They're all young men in their late teens from Brownsville, Brooklyn. They're all basketball players. They're all avid gamers (NBA 2K is a shared favorite). Despite having all the reasons in the world to be friends, their friendship is nothing short of revolutionary, a union of young men from rival housing developments steeped in violent gang-driven conflicts that ordinarily would have kept them from daring to even speak to one another.

When many PeacePlayers from Brownsville describe their neighborhood, they share a combination of pride and raw honesty about the challenges facing their community. Or, in Chris' words: "A lot of pros and cons of living in Brownsville. It's a good neighborhood and good environment to be at, and then there's times where in certain areas you can't be there at a certain time because you might run into something you don't want to run in to run into someone you don't want to run into." Throughout their lives, these five friends have had to deal with the fallout of a century of systemic discrimination against Black people in their neighborhood, and to abide by the gang lines that divide their community. Where they can go, who they can hang out with, what colors they can and can't wear - they have learned to live by a strict unwritten code, in the hope that it will keep them safe. The fact that Ulijah, Javonn, Raishan and Chris are not gang affiliated does not matter: they still have to live by gang rules.

Javonn, who moved to Brownsville when he was 12, was really affected by the violence that he witnessed around him. But for Javonn, and for other PeacePlayers from Brooklyn, basketball has acted as a sort of protective force field.

"There was one time when I was going to practice there was people looking at me and they're like who's that. Oh, he's basketball let him ride. So, I guess basketball gives you this shield in a way of being a basketball player gives you a shield of all that violence."



Like Javonn said, when these young men joined PeacePlayers, they found that safe space, to be themselves, and to explore friendships across the divides. But the courage to do either of those things is completely their own. "We're not here to impress each other, we're here to get better together. It's not like they got to act like this person, act like that person and to impress us or to act like this to be down with them. Once you join PeacePlayers it's like a family. You don't got to try. You just be yourself," says Ulijah. In line with these impressions, the entire team chose a set of three team values that would define their interactions with each other, as players and as friends: Respect. Family. Loyalty. "It's like a checklist where we respect each other and hold each other accountable. It's like the three key things that we expect from each other," says Raishan.

In Brownsville, the relationships between Ulijah, Javonn, Raishan and Chris are a symbol for what is possible. And when they walk around the neighborhood with their PeacePlayers' gear, people notice. Chris says, "At first when they saw me join PeacePlayers my mom would see me walking around with all this gear and she'd ask where you getting all these clothes from? She was like you must be really engaged if you just repping everything. I have cousins that see me outside. They would ask what age is PeacePlayers [for] and how to join."

Perhaps similar to the brotherhood many youth seek from the gangs that occupy their neighborhoods, the boys discovered something bigger than themselves. Despite once feeling as though the only person there for them was themselves, PeacePlayers now represents a union that defies the rules of the game.



DO YOU BELIEVE IN **MAGIC?**

Jen Burt could only describe what was unfolding before her eyes as magical.

For nearly a year, the kids had slowly stopped showing up for the after-school program at Baltimore's St. Francis Neighborhood Center, where Jen works as Director of Education. She didn't take their absence personally or need to search far for reasons for the drop off in attendance.

St. Francis was fully online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and she understood why kids would choose to bypass a virtual after-school program after being in front of a computer all day for school.

So when the school year ended and restrictions on in-person activities were lifted, the kids started to drift back to St. Francis. But the program they had left wasn't the same one they found upon returning. What they found was PeacePlayers.

During the months away from in-person programming, St. Francis and PeacePlayers Baltimore developed a partnership that included coaches and staff from PeacePlayers teaching conflict resolution through basketball skills. It was just what the kids needed.

It was just what Jen needed.

"To be able to offer in-person programming for the summer coming back into 2021 is one thing," she said. "But then to see the joy and the conversation and just being together that could happen in a space created by PeacePlayers – like it almost seemed effortless, like it was just meant to be? That's why I use the word magical. It's like it just happened."

Of course, it didn't just happen. PeacePlayers had approached St. Francis with the same care and patience that they show all the schools they approach. There is no hard sell, only explanation and providing an opportunity to learn about the PeacePlayers program. When PeacePlayers Baltimore's LaToya Fisher and Chinny Nwagbo first reached out to St. Francis in early 2021, the timing also happened to be just right.

"It's when we were looking for partners," Jen said. "They spoke a little bit to this idea of changing the narrative of their communities and how that's a multifaceted process. But the way in which both [LaToya and Chinny] approached me with such intention for specifically working with Black communities, that is definitely something we were looking for."

"We're not looking for partners who are just performative or who are doing the work for the wrong reasons. We're looking for partners who are working with intention. And I think that's what really struck me about them, and just the organization in general."

Jen, along with St. Francis' Volunteer and Partnerships Coordinator Angela Miller were impressed enough with PeacePlayers that they quickly collaborated on a 7-week program that launched in the summer of 2021 for kids in Grades 3 through 8. The weekly sessions involved basketball skills, of course, though Miller recognized that the basketball portion was a means to an end.

"The kids had been behind a computer screen for a year," Jen said. "It was just a physical outlet and that's what all of our kids needed. It wasn't a forced competitiveness or set up that you have to like

basketball to interact with this. It was just a situation where we're just going to practice these skills in small groups and it's going to be super focused and you have a coach who's cheering you on the whole way."

The first group of weekly sessions went so well that a second session was put in place for the fall. And just like that, a partnership was born. Jen couldn't be happier with the wonderful PeacePlayers coaches who have created a safe, nurturing environment for the St. Francis kids. But the relationship goes beyond just showing up at the gym at the prescribed day and time.

Ultimately, the reason this partnership has worked and will continue is because the St. Francis faculty came to quickly trust the PeacePlayers methods and all their coaches. Angela had a gut feeling things would work out after LaToya and Chinny first shared their ideas with them.

But it wasn't until the sessions began and everyone was able to see the process in action that it was clear this was going to work.

"It's partially intuition," Miller said. "It's partially observing how the coaches are interacting with our students and our staff. PeacePlayers tried to bring people into the fold rather than exclude based upon whether or not a student is athletically inclined or not. Encouraging the intention and the empowerment of the moment rather than the sort of competitiveness of it. I feel like you can tell those things pretty quickly. I just feel like that was obvious and then after the first session, we had glowing reviews from our teachers during the summer."



WHEN **FATE** COMES KNOCKING

Fate has a funny way of inserting itself into your life when you least expect it. To be fair, 15-year-old Onyeka Arah wasn't expecting a simple email from her basketball coach to change her life.

Which is why, on that day in 2015 when fate came calling, Onyeka nearly ignored it.

The email was an invitation to travel with an organization she had never heard of — PeacePlayers — to a country about which she knew very little — Israel — other than that the conflicts there seemed dangerous and never ending.

For some reason, Onyeka opened it. And that's when fate had her.

"I visited the PeacePlayers website and took a look," Arah said. "I saw the work they do in the Middle East, the work they do in Cyprus, Northern Ireland. So then I was intrigued. I was like, 'Oh, okay, this is something even bigger than basketball.'"

Onyeka, then a high school freshman basketball player, accepted the invitation to visit Israel as part of PeacePlayers' Leadership Development Program. This would be her first time traveling any further than Minnesota, and her first time on a plane since being a toddler. Today, this trip remains her only time out of the country.

It was on that trip that Onyeka started to learn about bridging divides and conflict resolution. In fact, she described her trip to the Middle East as the first step in her becoming an active, global citizen with a global attitude, and as a moment in her life that set her up to be a person dedicated to the betterment of society: "Experience is the best teacher; one can never truly understand a situation until he/she has experienced it or spoken with someone who has. Even



more than that, I finally understood the effect and necessity of organizations like PeacePlayers."

But that trip wasn't a one-and-done experience. As fate would have it, that first email is still paying dividends even all these years later.

"I'm not the most social person," Onyeka said. "I'm also not the loudest person in any room that I enter, but something told me you know, take advantage of this opportunity. It might not come again. And ever since, PeacePlayers has kept coming around. I never could have expected that. After the trip I knew something had changed. I knew I had gained an experience that would follow me the rest of my life."

Oneyka was a decent high school player but a series of concussions ended any chance she had of playing at the next level. So she headed off to the University of Maryland and attended college for a couple years before deciding to take a break.

That's right around when fate came calling once again.

Onyeka had met a PeacePlayers fellow named Latoya Fisher during her trip to Israel, and at some point learned that Fisher went on to become the director of PeacePlayers Baltimore. Onyeka wrote her an email just to say hello and perhaps offer to do some volunteer work, but she never sent it. A few months later, however, it did prompt her to visit the PeacePlayers Baltimore website.

"So I go to the website, and I see a job posting," Onyeka said. "First, I see that Chinny Nwagbo is listed as interim director and I'm like, wait a second. I know her. Chinny was teammates with my high school basketball coach at Syracuse and she had visited one of our

basketball practices when I was a freshman. So I was like, I know her. And then I'm looking through and I see all this cool stuff PeacePlayers Baltimore's doing. And I see a job opening.

"I was like, you know what, I'll apply for this. So I sent my resume and cover letter and she got back to me right away. And then after that, I met her and everything and I got to join PeacePlayers Baltimore in October, 2021. Now, Onyeka gets to use all those things that she picked up on the trip to the Middle East — global citizenship and using basketball to bridge divides — as a youth development basketball coach for PeacePlayers Baltimore.

Onyeka, now 21, joined just in time to be part of PeacePlayer Baltimore's fall programming at Northwood Elementary School, Sandtown-Winchester Academic Academy and Steuart Hill Academic Academy. She and the other coaches visited the schools four days a week, working with the students on concepts that are central to PeacePlayers' philosophy that sport should be used to build relationships and be a force for peace and equity.

"We put everything in ways that the kids can understand and relate to without watering anything down," she said. "All of the PeacePlayers concepts, these are things that kids can see and recognize. They just might not have the language yet for everything. So we kind of bring the vocabulary, introduce the concepts, and then we do different activities to kind of get them to fully understand to reinforce what we want them to do."

"It's really cool to see that it works. I'm kind of a living example of the PeacePlayers journey, and I hope to be part of it for a long time to come."

CRED WHERE CREDIT IS DUE

As two organizations fiercely dedicated to using peaceful measures to stop the spread of violence within at-risk communities, Chicago CRED and PeacePlayers were natural partners from the get-go.

So when an opportunity arose to blend Chicago CRED's deep ties to the Roseland community with PeacePlayers' expertise at using basketball to engage young people, it quickly turned into a successful union that could reap benefits for many years to come.

Through the work of leaders within both programs, Chicago CRED and PeacePlayers collaborated in the fall of 2021 to bring together dozens of young men and women for several evenings of good-natured, competitive and fun-filled basketball. The sessions, most of which were held at the Pullman Community Center, culminated with an All-Star night at the CSO Complex that led off with a 3-point contest followed by a final game.



The reality is that prior to joining CRED, the idea of most of these individuals together in the same space would just be too risky. But, the league sort of naturally self selects. "Being in CRED itself is an everyday commitment to non-violence. What they are doing is brave," says Paul Robinson, Deputy Head of Programs.

For many young men and women in the Southside of Chicago, violence does not seem to be a choice, rather a survival tactic. Through street outreach, tailored coaching and counseling, job placement, and advocacy, Chicago CRED works with hundreds of young men and women to radically reduce gun violence. They demonstrate that choice does in fact exist. But of course, it's not as straight shooting as it sounds.

The inability to engage in a healthy game of streetball is only due in part to groups being at odds with one another, or affiliation. Many of the rims in the Roseland community have been taken down as a result of the violence that often occurs on the courts. Streetball is very rarely an option.

So, ahead of activities, Terrance Henderson – supervisor of Chicago CRED for South Roseland/West Pullman – started off by gathering participants off the court and asking a simple question: Can you get along?

"We have everybody come to the office and then do a little meet and greet so they can see faces," Henderson said. "But you got to do it in layers, you just don't want to just bring people around. You just don't know. I've seen some conflicts happen when people get surprised by some individuals that's gonna be around. So I ask who's in conflict. I'll let them know who's going to be there ahead of time so they get to make the decision before. "I want to give them that option, without it being a surprise. That's what made this successful."

This first series of games were competitive throughout. But winning wasn't the only measure of triumph.

"I came out to have fun, to just let me do what I do," said Josh Smith, 21, a Roseland resident who has been active in CRED since 2018. "I don't really care too much about winning or losing, I just came to have fun. I just came to play basketball."

Keith Walker, 25, was a newcomer to CRED as well as PeacePlayers. But in just a few months that the Roseland resident had been participating in CRED events, he had come to trust them, and, in turn, he trusted PeacePlayers.

"I trust the guys with CRED," he said while taking a breather during one game. "I'm comfortable with them. I wouldn't expect no BS."

Meanwhile, more preparation was also taking place on the PeacePlayers side. PeacePlayers Chicago Director Andrea Johnson seamlessly set up the games by arranging for referees, securing equipment and jerseys, and ensuring the participants always had a secure location to play.

"Going into this collaboration, I knew the power of sport and its ability to bring people together. It has already been proven that basketball can unite those communities in conflict, here in the city, by finding that common ground on the court that can ultimately lead to change in the streets. Our goal with this partnership with CRED was to provide a safe place for the young men and women to compete against each other and create an opportunity to do something productive for 3 hours on Friday nights."



At first, these sessions were hosted with one main goal in mind – to provide a safe space of play for those who are "really in it, in it", Andrea says. Now, as they approach the second go around, more focus will be given to deepening relationships through sport with folks typically at odds with one another. The interest is there, now it's time to bridge divides – the PeacePlayers way.

"I'm optimistic about what it can do for the community," Henderson said. "I told some people this could happen. So I kind of got that I told you so kind of attitude. Because anytime that you add this level of at-risk individuals, that's conflict with each other. The first thing that people say is it's not going to work and something bad's gonna happen. And you know when it all comes to fruition and everything ends on a positive note, you give yourself a pat on the back."



TIME HEALS ALL WOUNDS

For six excruciating years, Tee Buchanan was practically tethered to her apartment.

A seemingly innocuous knee injury, suffered when she fell while trying to break up a fight at the Department of Children and Family Services home where she was working, had made her essentially homebound for over half a decade. Tee has always given her all to helping young people who've fallen on hard times, even to her own personal detriment.

For anyone, this would be difficult. But for Tee, a basketball star at Chicago's Westinghouse High School who later won a national championship at Division II Washburn University, it was practically unbearable.

But she knew this wasn't the end of her story. And it wasn't, not by a long shot.

Enduring eight surgeries over the course of a decade, Tee finally regained some mobility and in 2017 began a rewarding career as a P.E. teacher. Not long after, PeacePlayers Chicago Director Andrea Johnson, who had once recruited Tee to play at the University of Illinois-Chicago, approached her about doing some volunteer work with PeacePlayers' new Chicago program.

Two years later, Tee, happily settled into a life of teaching and service that only a year or two earlier seemed unimaginable, received another offer from Johnson—would Tee be interested in joining PeacePlayers on a full-time basis?

It would require giving up a career she adored, and it

understandably took time for her to reach a decision. But in the end, her choice was clear.

"This is the work I want to do," said Tee, who joined PeacePlayers Chicago as its new Program Coordinator in January, 2021. "I always said when I get done playing basketball, I want to work for non-profits in the community, being an inner-city girl working in a community to make a difference. I feel like that can be impactful. The kids feel like they have some type of hope when they see somebody like me who has done different things. And it was just literally picture perfect."

Although her decision to leave teaching for PeacePlayers was the right one, Tee remained close to many of her students and has continued to be there for them through difficult times. One of her former students died of cancer, another was killed and yet another was shot in the arm but survived. As someone who grew up surrounded by a tribe that ensured she remained on track, it was only natural that she showed up for her surviving student by providing meals and emotional support not only to the student, but to their siblings as well.

Being the kind of person who builds relationships and develops trust within the Roseland community is why Tee was a perfect fit for PeacePlayers Chicago. One of the kids she began to help when she first joined PeacePlayers was dealing with all sorts of troubles. His mom was battling cancer and he was making bad decisions at school and in his personal life. Reaching him became her mission.

"I told him how I grew up, my story and my upbringing," Tee said. "There was a lot for him to relate to. I told him you don't have to

stick to your environment. You can overcome what you're going through if you allow PeacePlayers to work with you and help you. You will see the difference."

Tee describes her formative years in the inner city as being defined by community. There was a certain level of respect that even those who were gang affiliated had for the path she was on. They often went as far as to provide protection on her journey to and from practice, because ultimately, they wanted better for her. Her neighbors looked out for the young people, and held folks accountable. "If anyone was out of line, it was acknowledged", Tee says.

By sharing her story and not giving up on a young man facing difficulties, Tee was true to her word. She made a difference, which is all she ever wanted to do when she was stuck in her apartment waiting for her body to heal.

"You see this kid now, he's an honor roll student, made the varsity basketball team, getting recruited by colleges," she said. "He tells me all the time when he sends me a message just thanking me for having those conversations with him all the time. I'm always checking in to make sure not only he's doing well, that his family is doing well. I'll do those things in a heartbeat for anybody."

"I feel like being in the classroom for eight hours a day you're impactful. But the time I'm able to spend here is more impactful than what I can do than being in the classroom. And that's when I knew I made the right decision."



WHEN COURAGE SPEAKS

When the Detroit Pistons and PeacePlayers United States began designing a series of community conversations in 2020, the idea was simple: gather dozens of parents, youth and community leaders into one room to discuss important issues facing the Detroit community and come up with common sense ideas to try and resolve them.

Everything went as planned. Except the getting together in one room part.

But that finally changed for the fifth Community Conversation on August 12, 2021, at the Henry Ford Detroit Pistons Performance Center, the Pistons' state-of-the-art training facility, when improved Covid guidelines made it possible to meet in person rather than on Zoom call.

The conversation's series, which was first launched in May, 2020, has been championed by Pistons leadership, including chairman Arn Tellem and Vice President of Community & Social Responsibility, Erika Swilley.

The determination to be proactive members of the Detroit community is what brought over 50 people together in a room overlooking two glistening basketball courts on a steamy day in August.

The topic – “A Return To In-Person Learning” – was selected to allow students, parents, school administrators, police officers and other civic leaders to discuss ways to best handle the upcoming school year when students would finally be returning to the classroom on a full-time basis.

After a warm welcome to all from Pistons senior vice president of marketing Alicia Jeffreys, PeacePlayers Detroit Director Jasmine Cooper assumed hosting duties and the evening's festivities were underway.



Everyone who wanted an opportunity to speak was given a chance, with the students in attendance – including several members of the Pistons Youth Council – being just as willing to speak their mind as any of the adults.

Youth Council member Kassidy Williams said she was “excited to be able to join clubs and go to games again. To feel normal.” Cameron Collins, a student representing the AAA Mentor Program, said he was just “looking forward to having a normal schedule again.”

But with Covid still very much a concern, exactly how “normal” things really could be was on the mind of Youth Council member and PeacePlayers participant, Carrington Boards.

“How are we going to keep the air clean?,” she asked. “How are we going to filter out Covid while students are in the school? Another concern I have is how are we going to connect with other students in our school?”

“Last year was my first year of high school, and I didn’t get to connect with a lot of people in our class. So how are we going to get to know people? Covid has caused a lot of teenagers stress and anxiety. How are we going to cope?”

With those questions and others like it lingering in the air, everyone in attendance broke up into six groups to begin discussing topics and coming up with possible solutions. For example, on the topic of education concerns, some possible solutions included creating a Safe Detroit Play Center and having more community meetings for those impacted.

Many of the adults in attendance during the 2 1/2-hour event shared their insights into the best way schools can operate during the coming year. But everyone agreed it was the kids who stole the show.

“To the young people who spoke, thank you,” said Detroit Board of Education President Angelique Peterson-Mayberry. “Thank you for being courageous enough to come here and be transparent and open up about your fears. That is something adults still can’t do. So I commend you for that.”

Pistons legend and former Detroit Mayor Dave Bing, who participated in the group discussions, came away extremely impressed by the young people – several of whom were involved with PeacePlayers Detroit – who came to try and carve out a better future for themselves, their peers and the kids who will come after them.

“Listening today, it’s the first time that I’ve been exposed to a lot of the kids at PeacePlayers,” Bing said. “But they seem to be very motivated, they seem to be engaged. They want to share things that they’ve been exposed to, things that they’ve learned with their counterparts.”

“Having the opportunity to listen to them and give them a little bit of advice it’s exceptional what the Pistons are doing, I’m happy to see this.”

MUCH MORE THAN A GAME

The first time Jacob Anderson, 14, heard about PeacePlayers, his expectations weren't exactly soaring.

An entire afternoon spent running around with kids he didn't know, playing a sport he didn't like, had very little appeal to him. It sounded even worse to his younger sister, Bre Coopwood, 12, whose approach to playing basketball was to, well, not play basketball.

Nevertheless, when an organization they are both a part of, The Boys and Girls Club of Watts/Willowbrook, began collaboration with PeacePlayers they decided to set aside any apprehensions they had and give it a try, out of trust and loyalty for the leadership at the Boys and Girls Club.

And it turned out quite differently than what they were expecting.

"I did not like the idea of having to play basketball," Bre said. "Until I finally started the program."

Jacob had a similar reaction.

"I didn't think I would have fun at first," he said. "At the Boys and Girls Club, I did have friends, but I wasn't talking to everybody. But with PeacePlayers, I got to talk to everybody. And sometimes I could be on teams with people that I would never think I would be on teams with, that I would never work with. I liked working with other people a lot."

While many of their peers at the club went to different schools, PeacePlayers bridged the gap that made it seemingly difficult to connect with more than just the familiar faces.

During their first PeacePlayers session, Jacob and Bre learned that they hadn't signed up for basketball lessons but for life lessons. PeacePlayers uses basketball as a way to help young people develop skills – working together, building relationships – that will accompany them in whatever path they choose.

Sure, they were on a basketball court and there was dribbling and shooting. But there were other activities designed to connect kids to one another rather than independently turn them into better basketball players.

Bre's favorite activity was a game called "Metal Pipes" in which groups of three are tasked with transporting a ping pong ball across the gym using two metal pipes.

"I was getting frustrated," Bre said. "Like, 'Ah, I can't get it to the end of the gym.' But at the same time I was like, I'm kind of having fun. Like, this is fun. I want to do this again."

When it came time for their summer session to come to an end, Bre thanked PeacePlayers' Evan Unrau and Natalie Gutierrez by making them hand-crafted earrings that grabbed the attention of their friends. Evan described her reaction to the gift as pure admiration for Bre's "entrepreneurial spirit", as she detailed the

resourcefulness of what she had created. In return, Bre lit up with joy. And what was more? Natalie's friends wanted a pair. A pair of dangle earrings crafted from purple plastic dinosaurs. She even went as far as to package them precisely as one would find in a store.

The impact of having positive experiences with PeacePlayers has extended from the basketball court to home and to the classroom. Jacob and Bre say PeacePlayers has helped them to reconcile some of their arguments – they understand now it's best to ask permission if they want to enter each other's rooms – and they're more interested in participating in Physical Education classes in school.

"Every single time I messed up on something and I'd feel really bad about it, they'd give me high five," Bre said. "They'd be like 'you can do this. You're doing great. You're amazing.' And it made me feel like wow, I can really do this. Sometimes you just need encouraging words in your life. Because if you're going through something you're going to be like I can't do this anymore. But with somebody saying 'you can do this, you've got this' I know I can succeed."

"And I like that a lot about the summer because it was constant. It wasn't just a one time thing. Right after the first week of PeacePlayers I was like I want to go back. I want it to be Thursday again. I want to play cool games. I don't care if we run, I just want to go to PeacePlayers."



IF YOU WANT TO GO FAR, GO TOGETHER

The bustling activity at Watts Oasis Court wasn't something that Jordan Sewell and D'Angelo Anderson usually noticed, mainly because they seldom let their bicycles take them very far from their homes.

While only 2.1 square miles, Watts is a district in Los Angeles with a rich and complicated history. Although in 1988 Watts was 80% Black and 13% Latino, its racial makeup has nearly flipped since then, impacting the city both socially and economically. A spike in gang activity in the 1970's in an effort to protect the city from the evils of systemic oppression has had a lasting impact on its inhabitants and the influx of community organizations committed to reimagining the city.

With this in mind, traversing the city is always done intentionally. Stay close. No trouble. Keep safe.

But one day last summer, the two boys let their curiosity get the best of them. Instead of turning around and pedaling towards home when they noticed some adults they had never seen before preparing for a basketball camp, they rode over and mustered up the courage to ask a simple question.

"Can we play, too?"

This wasn't an easy question for them to ask. There generally aren't golden opportunities for fun waiting for kids who live in Watts on every street corner. So in the back of their minds, they were sure the answer would be no.



"In my mind I was thinking she's going to say no and we were going to be embarrassed," D'Angelo said. "But she actually said yes. And I was so happy."

PeacePlayers Los Angeles Director Evan Unrau had a different answer.

"I was like, 'Yeah, come back at three,' she said. "And Jordan said "bet" and then they hopped on their bikes and came back at three. It was awesome."

Jordan and D'Angelo were back at 3 p.m. to participate in the first day of PeacePlayer LA's summer basketball camp. They went back the next day of camp, and the next, and became regular campers throughout the summer, and even after that.

"We still go back to that basketball court even after the camp was over," said D'Angelo.

Kiki is Jordan's mother and also runs a childcare where D'Angelo has been under her care for years. The two aren't brothers but Kiki treats D'Angelo as if he was her own. Shortly after they began going to the camp, Kiki stopped by to check out this free camp that had her two boys so enthusiastic all summer long.

It was there she saw Jordan and D'Angelo engaged in a way she has rarely seen, surrounded by adults with an uncommon ability to connect with young people.

"I love it," she said. "They need more things like that in the community for kids."

The PeacePlayers basketball camp at the Watts Oasis Court had, of course, basketball. But it also had life lessons. On one particular day, D'Angelo made what PeacePlayers coordinator San Dixon said "wasn't the best decision."

"We had a moment where he had to be honest about something," San said. "As time passed he realized if you are honest with somebody, especially an adult who sees you as just as even as them, we can come to some type of understanding. And I'm so proud of him. From that moment on, he stepped into this leadership role. We had some younger kids there. And he was one of those younger kids that I would have lead activities or have him be the team captain."

D'Angelo came away from the camp with improved basketball skills and a better understanding of himself.

"I learned to not lie and be honest," he said.

Both boys came away from their PeacePlayers experience with the realization that if you want to go far in life, you have to look beyond your own front door.

"When we ride our bikes, we don't usually go that far. The one time we went far, we found PeacePlayers."



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