

Batter up!

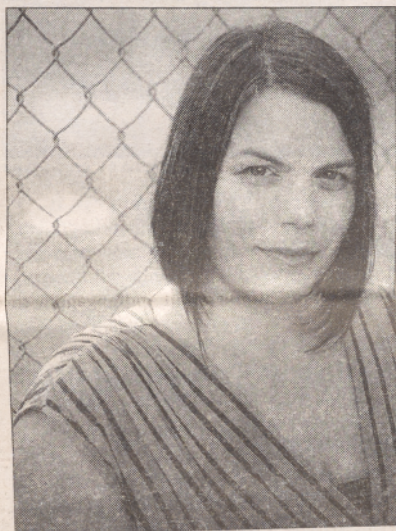
Friends of Baseball's Nova Newcomer talks about supporting youths through America's favorite pastime

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Street Roots recently sat down with Nova Newcomer, a lover of baseball, and the first Executive Director with Friends of Baseball to talk baseball and community.

Friends of Baseball, a nonprofit founded in 2005, works to not only promote the game of baseball and softball, they work to empower kids and adults of all ages and backgrounds to engage with the game. From coaches clinics to player equipment and scholarships to field maintenance, Newcomer and Friends of Baseball are working to give the game new life in Portland and throughout the state of Oregon and Southwest Washington.

Israel Bayer: *Tell us about Friends of Baseball.*



Nova Newcomer

Nova Newcomer: Our mission is to provide opportunities for kids to succeed on and off the field. So, there are lots of leagues and teams that may have a focus more around the competitive aspects of baseball and softball, which we support, but our real mission is reaching underserved kids so they have access to play. They may choose to go on and play more competitively, but we just want them to have the opportunity to take the field and learn from the game and apply that to their lives.

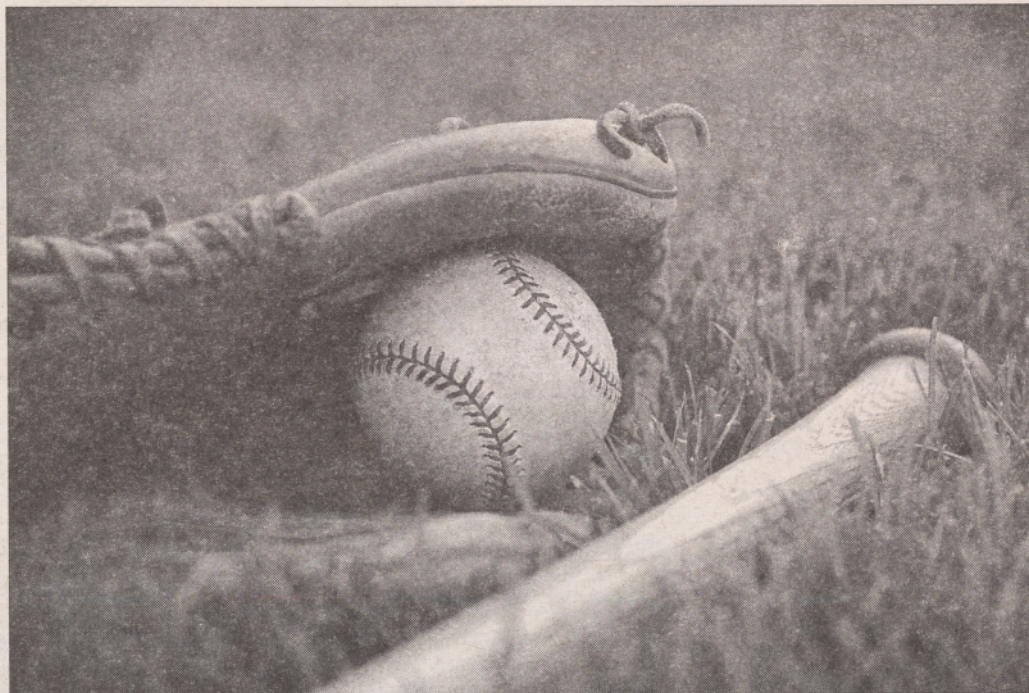
We serve Oregon and Southwest Washington and, since our founding in 2005, we have served around 40,000 kids through a number of programs: field improvement grants, some scholarships. We've done equipment distributions, both small and large scale. We actually had a couple of equipment distributions through Adidas that allowed us to keep some product here for kids in Oregon, but also to distribute them nationwide. We made some distributions to groups such as Roberto's Kids in Puerto Rico and Harlem RBI.

I.B.: *One of the top reasons that kids do not play baseball or softball is due to financial ineligibility...*

N.N.: For baseball and softball specifically, it's the combination of player fees and equipment. Some sports have a little bit lower access to entry because it doesn't require specialized equipment; you just need a pair of shoes and access to a ball of some sort. For the full set of gear and player's fees we're talking around \$200-250, which is a lot for people trying to pay the bills.

I.B.: *What is the importance of baseball and softball in our community?*

N.N.: From someone who loves baseball, it's an easy question to answer. If I were to think about it from someone who maybe doesn't understand the sport as well or love it as much as I do, it's about perseverance. It's also about failure. The best players in the world fail 70 percent of the time in baseball.



I.B.: *There's a great Ted Williams quote something along those lines.*

N.N.: Exactly. The idea that sports can provide a safe place for kids to experience failure and come back from it is important.

We couple our interest in getting kids involved in baseball and softball with an annual coaches clinic. We go to the coaches, who really are leaders and mentors in the community. Many times we don't think of coaches that way, but we know that some of them spend a lot of time with the kids. We actually elevate that role and say, 'This is an important role you're playing, here are some tools and resources to lead these kids and help them not only in baseball or softball, but in life.'

To me, it's about looking at what baseball does in the community from a slightly different perspective.

We did a field improvement emergency grant for a field in Kenton in North Portland, where during the snowstorm some people had gone out with ATVs on the field. It was about three weeks before opening day, and the fields weren't safe to play on.

We did an emergency grant, and basically said, 'We'll authorize \$500 for these repairs, and we'll go up to \$1,000 if the community matches it.' Within a week, we were able to get that \$1,000.

It got me thinking about what investing in these fields does for a community. For a park like Kenton, to have a field that the kids are excited to play on, that actually brings people out to the park and has people commune together. Those are, to me, the kinds of goals that all of us have, whether we like sports or not.

I.B.: *Is Oregon a good place for baseball?*

N.N.: I think Oregon's a great place for baseball. I think that the professional challenges are clear and known, but to me, from our vantage point — when we look like a program like Oregon State University. The strength of that baseball program, and the fact that they are recruiting from the Northwest and bringing local kids in, I think there's a real case to be made that the sport is thriving in Oregon.

I think that what you're seeing nationwide around trends is that baseball is still the number two sport for kids to play up until the age of nine, which is when basketball hits.

There are probably some things to look at and understand, and I think there's a need to go out and do that. What is the state of baseball and softball in Oregon? We want to be part of the organization that asks those questions. We've been out talking with high school coaches and long-time baseball folks, and just having an organization like ours that doesn't have a specific team or program bent, we can kind of, in a very curious way, ask, 'Is there something

holding the sport back? Why does this sport get played? What do you see when you see kids come play? What are the challenges you're facing?' People are really excited that there is an organization that wants to support the game of baseball, especially because they're busy coaching kids, or putting teams together.

I.B.: *For baseball fans and philanthropist out there, how do they get involved?*

N.N.: I think that what Friends of Baseball is giving is a direct ownership of the future of the sport. We are saying that baseball and softball have a place in this community and that we want to elevate that story and have it play its rightful part.

We're actually launching a membership drive. We are going to be developing some membership benefits, discounts and perks from some of our community partners.

We are really focusing on having direct sponsorship in the community that supports kids being able to play the sport. So even at the lowest level, you might be sponsoring a glove, or a player fee in a place where it's really needed.

I.B.: *From a young woman's perspective, are there opportunities for people to engage with the work that you're doing?*

N.N.: Softball is definitely a place for girls. All of the younger levels of baseball are coed, so more girls are certainly welcome to participate, and if there are financial issues, we're an organization to make it happen for them. You know, there's was an amazing pitcher in the Little League World Series this year, not the softball world series, who was a girl who threw a shut-out, so baseball is a place for girls.

What I've heard a lot of people say is, baseball would be a natural sport for young women to break through because there aren't some of the natural physical limitations other sports can have. I hope to see it in my lifetime.

At the end of the day, making sure that people that are new to our community know that there is a really great community-oriented opportunity to get involved with. I want to see really diverse and inclusive communities out at the ballpark. I think that's really important. It's the future of this sport, and it's the future of all the sports in our city.

To learn more about Friends of Baseball go to www.friendsofbaseball.org

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