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A Path for Kids to Grow

Friends of Baseball reach out to reverse declining numbers

BY NOVA NEWCOMER

"I just don't know where to sign my child up for baseball," one mom told us. For others it was comments like, "baseball is dying or kids just don't want to play." These are real issues that can be addressed in our communities when we work together. Access is the number one barrier to kids being able to participate in team sports. And it's an issue that every sports community is beginning to take a serious look at.

"Baseball used to be the sport where all you needed was a stick and a ball. It used to be a way out for poor kids. Now it's a sport that increasingly freezes out kids whose parents don't have the income to finance the travel baseball circuit," Andrew McCutchen, a black baseball star who recently won the Roberto Clemente Award for community service, recently said.

And just last month, David Squires' wrote in his Undeclared piece, *Death of Baseball Hurts Heart, Soul of Black Community*, "Sadly, America's long ago pastime – and black America's strong connection – is nearly invisible in our neighborhoods."

According to ESPN, 3.5 million kids in the United States will lose access to sports this decade.

But local youth development organizations like Friends of Baseball are working to reverse that trend, using sports as a vehicle to reach, engage, and nurture children.

In the last year, the organization has partnered with other community groups to establish an after school program called Full Count at several Portland metro area public schools and is working to increase opportunities for youth of color and low income youth whose access to baseball specifically, has plummeted in recent years due to housing and economic instability.

One of the most difficult impacts of gentrification is what it does to important social structures for displaced communities. Much like church communities and other gathering places, community sports leagues are upended. For example, the once thriving Peninsula Little League was more than just a place to play, it was central to the childhood memories for many youth in north and northeast Portland.

Paul Knauls Jr of Geneva's Shear Perfection and a recent volunteer baseball coach for Jefferson High School said, "Little league baseball gave this community so much in terms of a vehicle to unite, mentor and inspire children who are often forgotten. When children see all the parents and community members at the games supporting their efforts on the field, it makes a difference in their lives early on."

Knauls emphasizes what research on sports demonstrates



A pair of local youth experience the lasting bonds and positive interactions that are part of the experience of playing youth sports like baseball.

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