

Youth Sports Grants Create Boundless Opportunities

The late owner and founder of the Buffalo Bills wanted his foundation's investments in the communities he loved to have immediate, substantial, and measurable impact.

The first round of grants from the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Legacy Fund for Youth Sports at the Community Foundation accomplished that. In June 2018, a total of \$329,000 was distributed to 20 youth sports and recreation programs that expected to reach more than 6,500 youth in Monroe, Ontario, Seneca, and Wayne counties within the next year.

The programs and projects that received grants addressed needs outlined in the 2017 report "State of Play: Greater Rochester & The Finger Lakes," which examined access, quality, and participation in local sports and recreation programs.

"We tossed around ideas on how we could interest young people to play more individually or with a peer group for an hour a day," said Bob Ward, athletic director at St. John Fisher College, which received a \$21,650 youth sports grant with three key components:

- The 2018 summer youth basketball camps, held at the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Athletic Center, refined instruction to teach the 300-plus participants from second to 11th grade how to initiate play with others, choose teams, settle disputes, and keep a game going;
- A two-hour "Teaching to Initiate Play" professional development curriculum was shaped in conjunction with Fisher's Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. College of Education and will be shared with 18 physical education teachers in the Gates Chili Central School District; and
- Nineteen fifth- and sixth-graders from low-income

families in the Gates Chili district attended the camps and received free transportation, lunch, and snacks.



Ward explained that youngsters choosing teams need to think beyond picking their friends. For a pick-up game, it's important to make sure to consider shooting and ball-handling ability, specific positions (someone taller as the center), and what other skills a player can contribute to the team being assembled.

Educational research supports Ward's efforts, which also link to New York State physical education goals as well as social-emotional learning through independent, collaborative play, said Susie Hildenbrand, Fisher's associate dean of education. "It's a perfect match."

The camp participants "now have a focused, routine way to learn how to practice a skill. And maybe if they can meet up with others, they can say 'Let's play,' and they know how to do that," said Hildenbrand, who collaborated with Ward on the teacher curriculum.

"We talk a lot about leveling the playing field. Exposing our students to something like this is a game-changer," said Kimberle Ward, superintendent of Gates Chili schools, who also happens to be Bob Ward's wife. She explained that a growing number of the district's students are not getting opportunities to play outside. The camp "gives them the confidence to initiate play with others."

Hildenbrand sees additional benefits that could carry over to academics in the classroom. When learning to practice on their own and at their own pace, “they’re internalizing this idea of ‘if I want to get better at something or learn something, I can take the initiative to do something first.’ ”

Once this concept is introduced to the Gates Chili physical education teachers, Bob Ward expects it will result in many positive ripple effects.

“The win-win in all of this is, if youth begin down this road of having fun and developing a skill and doing it consistently ... this leads to the cycle of fun, skill competence, and fitness we are looking for,” said Ward.

See a full list of our 2018 youth sport grantees.

Photo above: Six of the 19 Gates Chili Central School District students who were invited to participate in summer basketball camps at St. John Fisher College, thanks to a grant from the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Legacy Fund for Youth Sports (photo by Erich Camping).