



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

there is an alternative.

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Shooting for the stars: Inner city basketball program has big impact



Alicia and Rachelle Dunsford with their AAA Junior Varsity Championship banner. They are now at the Collegiate.

Young people from inner city Winnipeg made their neighbourhood proud on Monday night. Six youth who grew up playing basketball at the Spence Neighbourhood Association brought home championship banners!

Spence sports history was made this week at the Manitoba High School Athletic Association (MHSAA) Varsity High School Basketball Finals. Youth from Spence neighbourhood played for champion teams at Oak Park and Sisler High School. Last weekend youth from Spence also

won the AAA Junior Varsity Girls championship, playing for the University of Winnipeg Collegiate. Spence Neighbourhood Association's barrier free sports programming is helping create winners!

The Most Valuable Player (MVP) of both the AAAA Girls and Boys Provincial Champions played their first league basketball games through Spence Neighbourhood Association's programs. William Sesay, now of the Oak Park Raiders, and Kyanna Pingue-Giles, of the Sisler Spartans. The same can be said for the MVP of the AAA Junior Varsity Girls final, Alicia Dunsford, of the University of Winnipeg Collegiate, and her all-star twin sister Rachelle Dunsford. Likewise, for Sisler All-Star Kyia Pingue-Giles and Liyanah Serapio, a Team Manitoba player and starter for Sisler. Now they are among the best basketball players in the province!

More than 300 inner city youth participate in Spence Neighbourhood Association's programs, which eliminate all of the barriers to connecting youth to high quality sports opportunities. While not all of them can be MVP at the elite high school level, all get to play sports, have a chance to be part of a team and build strong healthy relationships with coaches, and other adult mentors.

The success of these student-athletes,

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all supported by strong, loving families, is an example of what happens when we invest in inner-city youth. Without supports, these youth would not have had the same opportunities to develop their talents and to excel. Supports were provided collectively by the University of Winnipeg, Spence Neighbourhood Association, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Winnipeg and the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba. Together these groups ensured financial barriers would not deny these youth the same opportunities others in the city enjoy by providing uniforms, transport to games, quality coaching and healthy snacks. Family and mentors supported these youth as they grew and developed as athletes, moving on to elite teams and competition. It was a community effort.

Providing recreation to inner city youth requires a no barrier & no cost to play approach. Staff and volunteer support is required to make this happen. SNA actively fundraises to keep this program operating. The impact of a small injection of funds to cover league fees, transportation, a coordinator for all the teams and committed investment of volunteer coaches and mentors is huge. Strategic investment in youth takes time to reap rewards. We drove these kids to basketball games for the first time back in 2008-2009. Now we are so proud to see many of our youth achieving athletic excellence.

However there is more work to be done so all young people have a chance to fully participate. Winnipeg's child poverty rate is the third highest among large cities in Canada, behind Vancouver and St. John's according to World Vision's *Poverty at Your Doorstep* report. Comprehensive supports are needed to address issues of poverty in Winnipeg, including ensuring access to recreation. Economic circumstances should not determine where you finish in life. Youth prove to us that they are more than willing to take advantage of opportunities to excel, where they are supported.

How many other youth have the same kind of talent that could drive our city forward but remain stifled by barriers like access

to supports to participate in school, good housing, and adequate mental health supports? What kind of city and province could we build if we provided the same opportunities to all youth, in every important area for growth, today? How many brilliant artists, athletes, doctors, researchers, executives and lawyers are we missing out on, who could raise our collective achievement to new heights? Supporting young people to realize their dreams starts with community-based programs that are located close to home, with no barriers to participation.

More needs to be done to support youth to succeed. Once these elite athletes started playing at the high school level, many had to leave their immediate neighbourhood, often on bus, in the darkness of Winnipeg winters, to attend schools with high level sports opportunities. One pair of siblings earned a scholarship to the University of Winnipeg Collegiate and we love to watch them play home games.

For all Winnipeg youth to excel and drive our city forward, we need to provide resources to support these same high quality relationships and opportunities in sports, arts, and education in every neighbourhood. This means adequate funding at the city, provincial and federal levels in programs that reduce barriers to participation play for children and youth. This is our collective challenge. If these young all-stars are brave enough to learn and to grow, then we should be brave enough to provide the supports required to realize their dreams.

Jamil Mahmood is the Executive Director of the Spence Neighbourhood Association and Nick Tanchuk is a PhD candidate studying Ethics and Education at Columbia University and a former Sports Coordinator at Spence Neighbourhood Association. They are Research Affiliates at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Manitoba. Nick and Jamil were also teammates in the 2000 MHSAA AAAA Basketball championship.

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