



REACHING EACH AND EVERY ONE

Success Story

Basketball coaching session at MERC.

SNA's expanded Free to Play program gives youth a 'sense of belonging'

SOME YOUTH IN WINNIPEG'S WEST END have never had the opportunity to play for a sports team. They have never learned from a coach, or felt the excitement of participating in games and tournaments. Many of them have never even owned the proper shoes or socks to play.

But in 2023, that all changed.

The Spence Neighbourhood Association (SNA) — which runs the Free to Play Program for newcomer, Indigenous, and Black youth in the city's west end — got a financial boost to expand its sports services for these youth thanks to the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association's Reaching Each and Every One: A Community Sport



SPENCE NEIGHBOURHOOD ASSOCIATION
MANITOBA



This project is funded by
the Government of Canada



Basketball coaching sessions at MERC.



SNA Boys (16-18) team during the WMBA game.

Intervention program. This program, which was funded by the Government of Canada's Community Sport for All Initiative, seeks to remove barriers and increase sport participation rates for equity deserving groups across Canada.

"This funding has helped us save kids from negative influences like drugs, gangs, and violence. It's allowed us to direct them towards sports, where they have become more engaged in these more positive activities," says Apid Gurung, SNA's youth program coordinator. "When they come to our program, they find friends and sports that calm their mind."

The SNA'S Free to Play Program is held weekly at the University of Winnipeg Axworthy Health and RecPlex, which is provided free of charge by the university. The SNA's program includes unstructured basketball and soccer activities for newcomer, Indigenous, and Black youth who face financial barriers to sports.

But this latest funding boost has helped the SNA expand the program to cover the costs of basketball equipment and coaches — as well as participation in games and tournaments.

"Because these boys face financial barriers, they couldn't participate in a structured sports league. They are very good at basketball, and they didn't even know that Winnipeg had a league for minors," Gurung says.

He adds that the funding allowed the program to hire professional coaches who were once newcomers themselves, and could relate to participants.

"It was very helpful for the youth to become more disciplined, and to become more focused on the sport," Gurung says.

Carolina Meneses, SNA's youth program manager, says the funding also allowed the organization to bring in a youth mentor — a young man who had previously been involved in the Free to Play program — which laid the foundation for his career path to becoming a coach someday.

"The funding is temporary, so we wanted to be able to do something more long-term," she says. "He could relate to the boys, and I think it was a great opportunity for him to feel heard, and be seen. He was very committed. Now, we're trying to see how we can support him to do some more formal coaching."

She adds that the ability to hire this mentor was also beneficial for the youth, who were given a positive role model to look up to.

Between new basketball gear, access to coaches, and ability to play in tournaments, Meneses says the youth felt like they were in an inclusive and accepting environment — and were given an incredible opportunity to overcome barriers to sport.

"The youth and kids struggle a lot. Sometimes their neighbourhood can be unsafe, and there's always a risk they will get involved in gangs and violence," she says. "But sport is a way to keep them busy, where they can develop different skills. It gives them a sense of belonging."

This sense of belonging, she adds, also had great impacts on the participants' mental health.

"When people are struggling, they feel that everything has to be struggle. But this grant provided them with a space where they don't have to struggle, and they can access sports in an easy way," she says. 🍁