NEWS RELEASE

Flying High: OWLS Lacrosse Provides Elevated Opportunities for Chicago Youth

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The DICK'S Foundation is honored to be a longtime supporter of this enriching program that teaches lacrosse and so much more.

When the idea of playing lacrosse was brought up to Jaylin Kershaw and then his mom, Tanya Little, they both had the same reaction:

"What's that?"

They never could have guessed at the time, but thanks to the OWLS Lacrosse organization, that would become an integral part of their lives, inspire personal growth and serve as a gateway to exciting new experiences.

Sparked by a seemingly unending source of energy from Executive Director Sam Angelotta and his team, lacrosse has taken root in the West Side of Chicago and provides opportunities that branch far outside the city. Year-over-year grants from the DICK'S Foundation have helped the program continue to expand its reach while impacting thousands of kids and families for more than a decade.

“The program is completely free for the kids,” said Sam. “The sport of lacrosse is rapidly growing, but not at the same rate in low-income urban areas. We want to change that.”

Sam, a teacher who played club lacrosse at the Indiana University, initially ran the OWLS as an after-school program

for under-resourced communities beginning in 2011. When the organization began fundraising to build its future, the first equipment drive was held at the DICK'S store in Schaumburg, IL. The subsequent Foundation grants combined with the dedicated team have helped the program grow into a three-pillared operation that involves outreach, league play and the OWLS Academy that provides tutoring, academic workshops and enrichment experiences.

The program helps kids perform their best on the field and in school while also preparing them for adult life through college and career prep, including opportunities at local DICK'S stores.

"Our kids, they don't come from the best neighborhoods," said Tanya. "They aren't privy to the best opportunities. This program has opened so many doors."

Jaylin is now a senior with college in his sights and a part-time job at his local DICK'S store. Jaylin is just 17, yet he has a deep understanding and appreciation for what sport can do. He said the OWLS program has instilled in him structure and discipline, and helped him mature into the person he is today.

"It's a family," said Jaylin. "It's deeper than lacrosse. That's just a small bit of what the OWLS is."

Like so many others, Tanya and Jaylin learned firsthand how much the OWLS care. When Tanya's daughter went off to college a few years ago, Tanya could no longer afford to pay for tuition at both college and high school. How could she decide which of her children received the best education? Thankfully, it never came to that. The OWLS Academy Scholars program helped Jaylin secure a third-party scholarship and both children continued their ascent.

As a single mother with a full-time job, Tanya often had many responsibilities to juggle. Her father and siblings are often there to help, but if Jaylin ever needed a ride to or from practice, the OWLS were also there.

"They have always come through in the crunch when I needed them," Tanya said.

One of the moments Jaylin said will stick with him forever is when the OWLS won a league championship the day before he graduated from 8th grade. His coaches showed up at the ceremony with the trophy in hand and joined in the celebration.

There have been rough spots to get through as well. In fact, there was a time several years ago when Jaylin felt like giving up lacrosse. But through the support of his family and coaches, he found his way back and today he even mentors younger players.

"I have to give back, just like people gave back for me," said Jaylin.

Jaylin has been on about 15 college visits and has big plans. He would like to work in sports medicine so he can help athletes be their best. In the meantime, he's doing similar work to equip athletes in a DICK'S store and loving it. Jaylin earned his first job after preparing with his OWLS coaches, even going through mock interviews led by OWLS Academy Program Manager Aly Myers.

“This young man has matured a lot and I do believe it’s because of the support he has had through the OWLS organization,” said Tanya. “I’m proud of him and how far he has come.”

Jaylin is one of many young athletes who have excelled through the OWLS Lacrosse program. **Click here** to learn more about their impact within the community.