NEWS RELEASE

LEGENDARY PITTSBURGH GYM MAKES A COMEBACK

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The DICK'S Sporting Goods Foundation is proud to support the renovation of a historic gym and ensure its longevity for years to come.

The gymnasium at Centre Avenue Housing in Pittsburgh's Hill District neighborhood is one of the most important and historic gyms in the city. Throughout the last century, it has hosted sports icons while at the same time developed future stars.

A former YMCA, the Center Avenue Housing facility was visited by cultural luminaries such as boxing legends Ezzard Charles, Joe Walcott and Joe Louis, as well as baseball Hall of Famers Hank Aaron and Jackie Robinson. Even Hollywood star Denzel Washington got his workout in at the gym while he was filming the movie "Fences" that is based on the play of the same name by Hill District native August Wilson.

As the years of rich history accumulated, so did the need to rejuvenate the building. The gym, which is used for basketball, boxing and more, got the lift it needed thanks, in part, to **The DICK'S Sporting Goods Foundation**.

The DICK'S Sporting Goods Foundation provided funding toward a multi-million dollar building renovation of the space, which included a new ceiling, new lighting, new basketball hoops, wall pads, new flooring, fresh paint and a new heating and cooling system.

Before, left, and after the renovation of the boxing gym area.
The track that runs above the court was reinforced, repaired, painted and resurfaced. The project began in March

of 2020 and was completed in October of 2021. It was part of a larger project that renovated the entire building, including living units, recreational spaces and a refresh of the exterior.

Before, left, and after of the track that runs above the gym.
“It was so important for us to do our part to ensure this important piece of Pittsburgh history and the local community will be here for generations to come,” said Executive Director of The DICK’S Sporting Goods Foundation Aimee Watters. “So many talented players have come through this gym and we can’t wait to see the next generation do the same.”

The building was constructed in 1922. It was part of a group of heritage YMCA’s that were built by and to serve African-Americans, and to provide affordable housing within the community.

It also has produced an impressive collection of homegrown stars.

A PLACE WHERE LEGENDS ARE BORN

D.J. Kennedy is a professional basketball player and five-time winner of the $1 million winner-take-all The Basketball Tournament (TBT) event that airs on ESPN each summer. He’s a former St. John’s University standout and a local high school legend who helped guide Pittsburgh’s Schenley High School to the Pennsylvania state championship in 2007.

But before all of that, he was just a kid with a dream to play basketball. He still remembers when he was finally old enough to play in his first organized league at the Centre Avenue gym, and what it felt like to step on the court.

“I just remember going out there and saying, ‘OK, now I'm ready,’” said Kennedy. “Because from a young age, you know about all the history. If you wanted to play basketball, you had to make your name there.”

Kennedy, who was once recognized by the YMCA with a scholar-athlete award, was part of a talented group that went from their tight-knit Hill District neighborhood to global success. He has teamed up with former high school teammate DeAndre Kane, who also played professionally overseas, for four TBT wins. DeJuan Blair, another star player for Schenley High School and the University of Pittsburgh who played seven seasons in the NBA, joined them for the 2017 TBT triumph.

Kennedy continues to play professionally in the Ukraine. No matter where he or his former teammates have jetted off to, they will always share a lifelong bond that began as kids playing at the same gym.

“We weren’t just teammates,” Kennedy explained. “We’re family. We’re more like brothers.”

From basketball leagues to birthday parties, so much of their upbringing was tied to the facility. Kennedy is happy to see it has taken on a new form so that kids can continue the legacy, just like his generation did.

“It was there before us, that’s what makes it so special,” said Kennedy. “Now, we want these kids to go on and do big things.”

An overhead shot of the gym before, left, and after the renovation.

BUILT FOR CONTINUED SUCCESS

With so much history behind it, it’s important for the gym to remain a staple of the community. The renovations will help continue to build up the community and provide opportunities in an area where they do not always come easy.

“It was paramount that we get the kids back in the gym,” said YMCA Regional Executive Director Aaron Gibson, whose organization maintains close ties with Centre Avenue Housing. “We owe it to their parents and our community to provide them the avenue to succeed despite the obstacles they face. It’s our responsibility to make that happen.”

The new facility is already being put to use. In addition to basketball programs, the boxing club has sent athletes to Golden Gloves and USA Boxing Nationals tournaments. The boxing program also hosts other local gyms from around the Pittsburgh region for competitive sessions that build relationships.

Once the weather warms after the winter months, the gym and outdoor space will likely host additional events and activities.

“There is incredible history in the walls of this gymnasium, both for the African-American community and for all of Pittsburgh,” said Lena Andrews, the Director of Real Estate Development for ACTION Housing, the organization that helped make the entire building renovation come to life. “We are so glad we got the opportunity to renovate the gym and make it a place where future generations can create their own history in the space.”