

'Just Like Me' Teaches Kids to Play and Think Globally

Written by Alex Garcia and Diana Martinez, San Fernando Sun Staff

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Jerry Darko runs with students from Pacoima Charter Elementary School during a recent session of the afterschool program "Just Like You."

Jorge Capiz can say "hello" in Botswanan and Chinese and one of his favorite pastimes is "dog and bone," a Hindu game similar to the popular "tag" children in the United States play.

Capiz, an 8-year-old who attends third grade at Pacoima Charter Elementary School, has never been to Botswana or China, but he has learned about other parts of the world through an innovative after school program designed to expand children's

knowledge about geography and world cultures by playing the same games children in other countries play.

"What is the one thing that all children do? They play. Children from around the world are just like you", says Jerry Darko, the 24-year-old Zimbabwe-born and Botswana raised creator of "Just Like You."

"We use international sports and games to teach kids about the world. We have games that are variations of tag, others that are played with balls, sticks," he added.

With other students, Darko came up with the concept for the program while at a Nike weekend training camp last year, Laura Adams, the digital vocational manager for youth mobilization for Nike, said the Just Like You program has flourished and has continued to build and grow after the weekend camp.

"We brought in motivated youth leaders from areas throughout Los Angeles and introduced them to the idea of sports being used as a tool for social change and encouraged them to develop their own projects that could be useful to address their issues from their communities."



Darko shows some of the notes kids from Pacoima Charter Elementary School give him at the end of the sessions.

"I came up with the idea of a game exchange because I remembered as a kid all the fun things we played [in Botswana], Darko said.

The group called itself Team Awesome, made up of seven college students from the University of Southern California, Pepperdine University and UCLA. Many of them have an interest in both business and international relations; they all have a passionate interest in helping to bridge people on a global scale.

Current members of the team include Anne-Marie Herwig, Masters in Public Policy from USC, Chris Ovitz an MBA from Pepperdine, Jade Clemons a Business and French student from Pepperdine, Khiza Mazwi, Material Science PH.D from USC, Ruchira Da Silva Biology and Economics student from USC, and Amy Wunderlich a business student from Pepperdine.

Darko reflected when he first arrived in the United States in 2001 to attend college he saw a lot of discrimination and bigotry toward people who appeared "different."

People weren't culturally sensitive because they didn't know the rest of the world," he says.

Darko first came to the United States to study electrical engineering in Minnesota, studied physics at USC and is now attending Pepperdine University and studying finance has a masters in physics and is close to receiving two additional master degrees. He also works for a private equity firm.

Every Friday since October of last year, Darko and other members of Team Awesome spend an hour teaching some 20 kids from Pacoima Charter Elementary School about a particular country. Iris Zuniga-Corona Director of Youth Services for the Youth Policy Institute is a big supporter of the program, "The program is exactly the direction we want to head with all of our after school programs with a strong physical educational component and tying it into the innovative things that are being done that combines both cultural education and physical education." Corona said they have received positive feedback not only from the students but also from their parents. "I think they're doing great work and it's a good opportunity for the students to engage and have resources in their own community so they don't have to go outside of their community."

A member of the team, USC Masters student, Anne-Marie Herwig has worked on the program's curriculum with fellow team member Jade Clemons, "Students learn how to use maps and to identify countries, rivers, mountains, etc. They complete worksheets with fill-in-the-blanks, word matches and word searches, and they sometimes learn about a specific cultural aspect of a country or region (such as how to use chopsticks)," said Herwig. "But we think that the best way to keep youth really engaged and make the lessons seem real is to play."

Herwig said the majority of each class is spent playing games from the region that they are focusing on and showing them that there are kids all over the world just like them that they can connect with.

"We encourage them to talk about what we have learned in the classroom. They might learn a cheer in the native language of that country or name their team name after a major river. We also follow the California curriculum content standards to help students reach goals set for their grade level."

Herwig shared one proud moment where she says the impact of the program. "After introducing Southern Africa to the students at one school, one boy came up to me and started explaining how Botswana was one of the wealthiest nations in all of Africa. 'It's because of their diamonds, miss.' I asked him how he found out, and he said he had spent his time on the Internet one evening learning about all the different countries we were studying. So many of the kids we work with have never even been outside Los Angeles, much less the US. This gives them the opportunity to be exposed to places all over the world and whet their appetite for the big things their futures have in store."

They have a curriculum split into four-week sessions focused on each country or region, where they talk about the food, geography, history, culture and language of the area in question. And also games, because no matter where you live or what language you speak, all kids understand games, said Darko.

Pacoima Charter Elementary School is the only campus here in the San Fernando Valley where the program is currently offered. They also replicate it at Camino Nuevo Charter School in the Pico Union area of Los Angeles and have plans to start the program at Webster Elementary in Malibu near the Pepperdine campus. It's the hope of "team awesome" to build the program at schools throughout Southern California and then branch out across the country, then globally.

"It's been amazing, it's a lot of fun for the kids and for us, we started out playing games from China and now we're playing a game from India and you can see the similarities of the games that we played growing up. Dog and Bone is a lot like Steal the Bacon," said Chris Ovitz.



"We really show the kids that no matter where you grow up, we are all the same." Ovitz said they are looking toward building the program to become its own large non-profit to help raise more awareness for kids around the world.

The kids really look forward to Friday when the team shows up. "Sometimes the afterschool programs are more like day care centers, so when we show up they're excited."

"Volunteers can be trained to follow the curriculum that we are developing," said Herwig, who quickly rattled off the names of a number of international games some that resemble games played in the U.S. and others than have no resemblance. "Some of the games are played with sticks, so we had to modify those."

On the day the San Fernando Sun/El Sol visited the program, the game at hand was "dog and bone," where an object (bone) is placed in the middle and two teams of players (dogs) line up on each side. A player from each team rushes to the bone to try to pick it up and run to his side before the player from the other team tags him. A point is awarded for each player who reaches his side before being tagged and the first team to get 10 points wins.

It's a game that gets the kids excited and moving, as they run to try to avoid being tagged.

Darko, a lean and tall young man, has a natural love for the children and sometimes seems like one as he enthusiastically plays with them. But while he's quick to congratulate them for a job well done, he's also just as swift at reprimanding them for a bad behavior. When one child told another something that was wrong. "That is totally inappropriate," Darko told him.

Or when during a race, a kid pushed another one when reaching the end. He made him apologize to his classmate.

"We play more of a role than just teaching them about different cultures. We are mentors and role models," he says of his efforts to correct bad behavior.

But first of all, he wants the kids to respect each other and other cultures, and have fun doing so.

He's also trying to give them the attention they may not have.

"When I walk up, they light up, they're excited. They know we're going to be here no matter what. We're not going to let these kids down", he says. "We try to be their friend and help them with something that might have happened."

His plan is to create a Pen pal program with another country where kids from both places can chat and share about their experiences.

"We want to have a true cultural exchange. Right now there is a program in Honduras that could be a reality, but we're still working on it," says Darko.

But for now, he's working on getting the children past the television-fed ideas they may have about the world.

"When you ask a child about Africa, they say Madagascar because that's all they know," [because of the animated movie] he says. "But now I have 7-year-olds running up to me saying 'dumela, 'namaste, 'ni hao' (hello in botswanan, hindu and Chinese, respectively). They say I know where Botswana is. That's powerful," he says.

And so is for the kids, who seem to have been taken by the program. "It's fun. My favorite game is dog and bone. We get to run and tag people," says Brianna Torres, 8.

"I like it because you get to chase people and you get to win," says Kimberly Gomez, whose favorite countries are India and China and can say several words in those languages.

It's those things and notes that the children give them as they leave for home, with messages such as "I love you", "I want to be like you," that are worth more than any money Darko says he could receive for doing the program.

"When you see the kids, that speaks for itself. They can't hire people like us. We're just trying to give kids something fun and dynamic," he says.

And also instill in the children the desire to learn more and appreciate everyone, no matter their color, ethnicity, religion or language.

"As long as they leave the program being more sensitive to the world, more curious, more open, I think we've done our job," says Darko.

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