LIFTING UP UNDERPRIVILEGED YOUTH

Student Uses Soccer to Instill Community Values
by Sarah Leiser

This past year, Jimmy Hessler organized soccer camps in Jackson, Wyoming that gave over thirty children, ages 8-14, from low income families the opportunity to participate in athletics. The experience has inspired him to introduce the program to the Denver community and beyond.

Hessler, a second-year sociology student, grew up outside of Boston, Massachusetts. He and his family moved to Jackson when he was in seventh grade. There he met Miguel Cortes, who had immigrated to the United States with his family at age eight, and who helped him come up with the idea of soccer camps.

“Through him, I gained an understanding of the struggles of many immigrant families to get involved in their local communities,” said Hessler. “I also saw from him and my personal experience that there are a great number of kids in Jackson who are passionate about ‘fútbol’ but do not have much opportunity to play the game.”

Hessler saw the potential that he and Cortes had to create something together and make a change in their community. The pair brainstormed for months about what would be the most valuable way to spend their time over the summer to help the community and decided on creating a soccer camp, called the Community League. They reached out to the Doug Coombs foundation, a Jackson area non-profit that provides ski equipment, lift tickets and lessons to kids of low income families, for help.

“With the foundation’s guidance and support, along with the support of numerous influential members of our community, we made it happen, and offered thirty kids 72 hours of soccer from the months of June to August,” he said.

Hessler realized that he could also take advantage of the long winter breaks from the University of Denver. He reserved gym space at a Jackson middle school to hold an indoor soccer camp during the month of December. The first practice session was on a Monday before school and twenty kids were there. Hessler feels that “this is real confirmation that the camp was something beneficial to players, as I remember being in 7th grade, and how much I hated waking up at 7am.”

In the summer of 2017, Hessler and Cortes plan to create a four week camp in Jackson for fifty middle school students, as well as a five week league that will consist of only games. They intend to serve seventy-five kids through both of these camps.

Hessler hopes to bring his camps to Denver by working with the University and members of the community. “By planting this seed in Denver, we hope to grow our organization and begin to benefit kids and parents outside of the Jackson area.”

He also hopes to create his own non-profit in the future, one that has a system for soccer camps that can be implemented around the world.
“It is my belief that camps like these are important for childhood development because, through my eyes, soccer is the perfect metaphor for life. Our organization’s values are trust, forgiveness, patience and respect, and I truly believe these four values can be introduced and internalized through the beautiful game,” said Hessler.

“The Community League’s tagline, *mas que fútbol* (more than soccer), shows the vision that we have for our camps; we will not create the greatest skilled players, but instead hope to give the players the wisdom they need to begin living a happy and grateful life on the eve of their high school careers.”