

# THE ORANGES

CITY LIFESTYLE™

## SPORTS + RECREATION

*BUILDING COMMUNITY  
THROUGH BASKETBALL*

*WHAT STARTED AS A SEARCH  
FOR A PLACE WHERE GIRLS  
COULD SIMPLY PLAY HAS  
GROWN INTO SOMA HOOPS,  
A THRIVING YOUTH BASKETBALL  
PROGRAM BRINGING MORE  
THAN 1,000 KIDS TOGETHER  
IN SOUTH ORANGE  
AND MAPLEWOOD*

Our Women's Issue

MAY 2026  
CITYLIFESTYLE.COM

HOW SOMA HOOPS AND THE SOMA BASKETBALL BOOSTERS ARE REDEFINING YOUTH SPORTS

BUILDING CONFIDENCE, COMMUNITY



AND COURTS FOR GIRLS

ARTICLE BY CARLY MAC MANUS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SOMA HOOPS, RICH SILIVANCH



*Delia O'Donnell and Erica Dagley Galea*

**“YOUTH SPORTS  
DON'T HAVE TO BE  
TOXIC OR EXCLUSIVE.  
THEY CAN BE JOYFUL,  
ACCESSIBLE AND  
COMMUNITY-DRIVEN.  
WE'RE PROVING  
THAT HERE.”  
—TAYLOR VALENTINE,  
FOUNDER OF  
SOMA HOOPS**

In South Orange and Maplewood, a simple question sparked a movement: Where in our community is there a place for kids to play basketball for fun?

For parents like Erica Dagley Galea, the answer was once frustratingly unclear. Her daughter loved the game, but opportunities were limited, often coed programs where only one or two girls showed up or advanced travel leagues that were not the right fit for beginners. Rather than accept the gap, a group of parents decided to build something new.

That decision led to the creation of SOMA Hoops, now one of the largest recreation basketball programs in New Jersey, and the SOMA Basketball Boosters, a nonprofit designed to ensure access, equity and opportunity for every child who wants to play.

“This started because there was a void,” says Taylor Valentine, founder of SOMA Hoops. “We live in two towns full of kids, but there was no place where you could just show up, play basketball, have fun and feel like you belonged.”

What began with 11 girls playing in a borrowed league has grown into a program serving more than 1,000 children, with 41% of participants being girls, a number that exceeds national averages for youth recreation sports.

CONTINUED >



“KEEPING GIRLS IN SPORTS MATTERS. IT AFFECTS CONFIDENCE, MENTAL HEALTH AND SELF-ESTEEM. IF WE CAN BEAT THOSE STATISTICS HERE, THAT’S HUGE.”

—ERICA DAGLEY GALEA

### **MORE THAN A GAME**

At its core, SOMA Hoops is about basketball. But its impact reaches far beyond the court.

The program emphasizes participation, fun and community over pressure and performance. Games are held at the same time each week. Parents volunteer as coaches, referees and mentors. Older players support younger ones, and high school students gain leadership experience by refereeing games.

“We keep it simple,” Valentine emphasizes. “Parents support. Coaches coach. Players play. And the focus stays on the kids.”

For girls, that environment is especially powerful. National studies show nearly 70% of children drop out of sports by age 13, at about twice the rate of boys. SOMA Hoops is working to change that narrative locally by making the game accessible and welcoming at every level.

“Keeping girls in sports matters,” Galea shares. “It affects confidence, mental health and self-esteem. If we can beat those statistics here, that’s huge.”

### **REMOVING BARRIERS**

As the program grew, so did the need to support families beyond registration and gym time. That led to the formation of

the SOMA Basketball Boosters, a nonprofit founded by parents including Tracy Flanagan and Delia O’Donnell.

The Boosters focus on removing barriers, financial, social and informational, that can prevent children from participating.

If a family cannot afford registration fees, the Boosters cover the cost. If a child needs sneakers or equipment, they provide it discreetly. They also fund equipment for local schools, support physical education teachers and invest in high school programs so children have opportunities at every stage.

“We want every child to be able to touch the game,” Flanagan says. “Whether that’s once in gym class or all the way through varsity basketball.”

The organization also prioritizes inclusion. Through its Buddy Ball program, created in partnership with the South Mountain YMCA and led by Nicole Josey, a YMCA leader and local parent, neurotypical and neurodiverse children play basketball together, laying the groundwork for future unified sports at the high school level.

### **WOMEN LEADING THE WAY**

Women play a central role in shaping the culture of both organizations.

SOMA Hoops



CONTINUED >

O'Donnell, the Boosters' director of communications and marketing, explains the goal is to keep kids, especially girls, engaged as they grow older.

"I want my children to know there will always be a place for them to play," she says. "Even if it's not varsity or travel, there should be a safe, supportive space where they belong."

Galea, who also runs the resource platform Ask Me About Girls Basketball, helps parents navigate the often-confusing landscape of youth sports.

"The youth sports landscape can be difficult to manage," she shares. "If you have a daughter who wants to play locally, I want to help you know where to go."

That philosophy extends off the court as well. Student photographers, volunteers and interns gain real-world experience through the program, building skills that translate far beyond sports.

### A MODEL FOR THE FUTURE

In just three seasons, SOMA Hoops has become the largest recreation youth program in South Orange and Maplewood. But leaders say growth has never been the goal. Impact has.

The hope is that the model can inspire other communities searching for healthier, more inclusive ways to approach youth sports.

"Youth sports don't have to be toxic or exclusive," Valentine says. "They can be joyful, accessible and community-driven. We're proving that here."

For the girls running drills, making baskets and high-fiving teammates each week, the message is clear: The court belongs to them.

For more information, visit [somahoops.com](http://somahoops.com).



**"THIS STARTED BECAUSE THERE WAS A VOID. WE LIVE IN TWO TOWNS FULL OF KIDS, BUT THERE WAS NO PLACE WHERE YOU COULD JUST SHOW UP, PLAY BASKETBALL, HAVE FUN AND FEEL LIKE YOU BELONGED."  
—TAYLOR VALENTINE, FOUNDER OF SOMA HOOPS**