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PlayRox! The Power of Play

PATTY LENZ BOVIE **writer**

well before the pandemic, the kids were suffering. Screen time was off the charts. Activity levels were dropping. Obesity was rising. Anxiety and depression rates were surging. Now, with suicide rates spiking an additional 25 percent since 2020, the U.S. Surgeon General warns that youth are facing “devastating health effects as a result of the challenges experienced by their generation.” Dr. Nassir Ghaemi, Professor of Psychiatry at Tufts University School of Medicine calls it a “national mental health crisis.”

The “ImPerfect” Storm

Concerned with youth challenges in 2014, a team of local parents founded Community Investors (CI), a nonprofit dedicated to raising awareness and supporting youth wellness through organic remedies. “The rapid emergence of mass technology: smartphones, the internet, social media, and gaming, resulted in growing electronics addiction, interpersonal social retraction, inactivity, and obesity that profoundly affected our youth at increasingly earlier ages, pre-COVID,” reported Joe Roberts, CI’s executive director. “Equally disturbing is decreased participation, engagement, and value in community recreation. Sports *used* to be a healthy outlet for kids. But today, 70 percent of kids quit by age 13, nationally, with the number one reason being that sports aren’t fun. For too long, too few have noticed or cared, but when the pandemic took play away, we all saw the damaging effects. It’s the *imperfect* storm.”



COURTESY OF PLAYROX STUDENT MEDIA

SuburbanUrban Bridge at The Base & Excel Academy connects kids and communities through play



fitness & health “empower our next generation”

“I was fortunate to grow up with a program rocking sports with tunes and applaud PlayRox helping more communities tap the power in music, play, and balanced living.” -Jack Vandervelde, Co-Founder Helix ESports, singer, songwriter & Bucket Winner in 1st Annual Alumni Wiffle Ball Tournament supporting PlayRox. (left): Jack Vandervelde (holding baseball bat) and teammates

Organic Remedies

PlayRox, CI’s student-led, musically powered, fun-focused, inclusive community recreation platform, supports health and happiness by “rocking the power of play” with a unique blend of student coaching, music, and media programs. With balanced living at its core, a spectrum of programs mix free play, team sports, mindfulness, and social-emotional learning. *PlayRox* serves students from preschool through college throughout the year while in school, after school, and out of school. The program was recognized as a “Best Practitioner of Play” by Denise Pope, PhD, who co-founded Challenge Success, a Stanford-based national wellness initiative being used at Wellesley Middle School and High School. Based on formulas developed over three decades at Roberts’ popular Terriers Sports programs, Community Investors is creating blueprints to openly share with other communities. Their mission is to provide homegrown organic remedies to heal and empower our next generation.

Jack Vandervelde (holding bucket) in his younger days with teammates

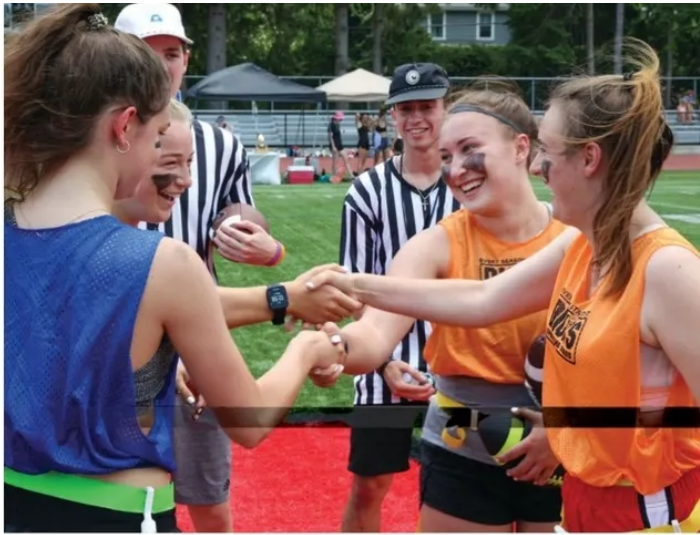


Rocking Through and Beyond Covid

While many town and school programs were shuttered during the pandemic, *PlayRox* provided remarkable service, rocking over 500 safely managed active play programs in Wellesley. “While we were honored to serve all, most meaningful was helping our high school students preserve treasured traditions,” said Roberts. When Wellesley High’s 2021 senior girls were unable to play Needham in their annual Powderpuff flag football game because of COVID restrictions, CI helped more than 60 girls enjoy intramurals culminating with a rebranded and energized *PowerPuff*, and “Bucket Game” to more accurately reflect the young women players. Its success inspired CI to launch a new GirlPower youth flag football program and summer sports camp. Over 150 Wellesley High students also participated in a *PlayRox* enrichment elective, while 200 students and 32 teams enjoyed a dodgeball tournament—all powered with music and positive energy.

Federal and State Designations

Recognizing its service, the U.S. Department of Health and Human



Last June's Wellesley High School PowerPuff "Bucket Game"

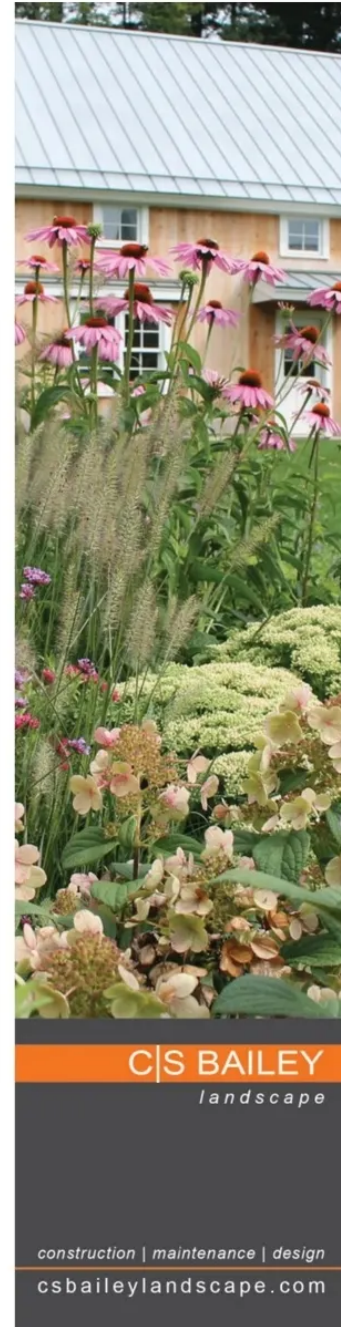
Services and the President's Council on Sports, Fitness, and Nutrition designated Community Investors as a *National Youth Sports Strategy Champion*. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts' Joint Education Committee is supporting CI's efforts to seek expanded reach by teaming up with schools and organizations so *PlayRox* can serve more communities.

Platforms and Bridges for Reach and Impact

"With capacity support, we have great platforms available to expand," reported CI's Board Chair Mike McGreal, a mental health executive. "We are striving to help build best practices for after-school, intramural, and enrichment programs at local middle and high schools. We also support town sports organizations with supplemental programs, advisory, and *PlayRox* elements to enhance experiences." Chris Cavallerano, a local venture philanthropist who helped found CI added, "When it comes to adolescents, school and town resources are essential partners if we want to position kids for success and positive life lessons. Providing healthy outlets for them to unplug from outside stressors and connect with themselves and others through play provides positive impactful experiences (PIEs)." *PlayRox* is also striving to connect kids and communities with its *SuburbanUrban Bridge* program. Pre-pandemic, CI successfully launched pilot programs at Excel Academy Charter Middle School in East Boston, Roxbury's The Base, and Framingham's Hoops & Homework led by *PlayRox* Wellesley student coaches.

Rocking Music

Plato once said, "Music gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and charm to life." With numerous studies showing music has a positive effect on movement and social-emotional development, *PlayRox*'s focus and unique dynamic is a harmony of student



fitness & health “spark passions and teach life lessons”



top: “I’ve never seen anything close to PlayRox’s fun, energetic environment.”
– Nate Freiman (top left in high school as Terriers’ coach) is a former Major League Baseball player and current Director of Hitting Development for the Cleveland Indians. bottom: WHS Class of 22’s Unfinished Business wins the Dodgeball Bucket following a 32 team double-elimination tournament.
(l to r) Milan Jacobs, Grady Collins, Jack Welburn, Blake Kelly, Alex Soderline, and Drew Carpenter.

music and coaching that delivers energizing, joyful, positive, and impactful experiences through choreographed active play. “Our Student Music Program is our heartbeat,” Roberts explained. “It’s our differentiator. Our DJs set the beat. They help the kids relax and have fun. Along with student announcers, they also pump teams up and energize games.”

Student Leadership


PlayRox student coaches not only lead teams, they also often play in games to maximize engagement and enjoyment of all participants, including themselves. Student coaches quarterback flag football to help get the ball to everyone. They pitch and catch in baseball, laying it in to get the ball in play and create fast-paced, action-packed games. Student refs use a unique “Scoreboard Based Officiating System” to balance games with calls when possible, striving for “epic finishes” to spark passions and teach life lessons. Those sparks of passion are “developmental gold needed everywhere,” remarked Dr. John McCarthy, director of Boston University’s Athletic Coach Institute. “*PlayRox* has developed a highly innovative approach. They create activities where children experience elevated levels of joy, an essential element to motivate lasting engagement in active play. They provide opportunities for critically needed physical, social, and emotional development. As virtual reality competes for our children’s attention, actual physical activity and play within the context of caring for others is needed more than ever.”

Dream Team

Cavallerano and Steve Pecevich, a veteran development professional, are helping CI build a “Dream Team” of foundations, corporate, and private partners for needed infrastructure, capacity, and value-added enhancements. One potential value partner is IM4U Learning, a music- and play-based social-emotional learning platform developed by Jim Mayer, Jimmy Buffet’s longtime bassist. IM4U Learning blends music, movement, and cooperative games to teach children lifelong skills that build hearts as well as minds. “Our synergy with CI to leverage music and play as unifying learning tools is extremely powerful,” Mayer said. “With a


shared vision of music and play being the foundation for engagement and childhood development in physical, social, and emotional skills, our expertise developing curriculum to align with *PlayRox's* active play experience generates tremendous potential together to reach and serve communities and families in many ways. Our goal is to engage youth positively so they can develop the essential social-emotional skills they will need to succeed in school and in life."

A Mission for Capacity, Reach, and Impact

"Beyond the play and fun, a primary lesson we teach is that life consistently presents challenges, and we all must learn how to transform challenges into opportunities for positive change," reflected Roberts. "The bigger the challenge, the greater the opportunity. In 2014 we were dedicated to supporting our youth. Now, we are truly on a vital mission. Kids need to heal and empower through play—at every age, in every town, city, and state. We have a formula that works and is constantly evolving. With increased support from government, corporate, and private partners, we truly have unlimited transformational potential. We encourage everyone to connect with us, learn more, and join us in supporting a happy and healthy next generation." 

TO FIND OUT more about Community Investors and *PlayRox* or to get involved, visit www.CommunityInvestors.net





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