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COMMUNITY INVESTORS



Wellesley Middle School students enjoying Community Investor's Straight Outta School Dodgeball. COURTESY PHOTO BY DARREN BOVI

A day of play and night of reflection

DodgeFest, community discussion focused on giving kids time to enjoy free, relaxed play

By Robbie Johnson

Two March events offering different experiences will support one mission: to give kids more opportunities to enjoy free and relaxed play in their hometown.

DodgeFest will be an afternoon celebration of youth activity and community, featuring free play open gyms, dodgeball, performances from youth bands and student art exhibits. Held March 19 at Wellesley High School, 50 Rice St., DodgeFest will also feature a performance from Cam Meekins, a recent Wellesley High School graduate and award-winning rap artist.

"The State of Play - Challenges and Opportunities in Youth Sports" will be a community discussion featuring Bob Bigelow, former NBA player and nationally recognized speaker. Bigelow will be joined by a panel of local experts in youth coaching, psychology and orthopedics to add perspective and help educate parents. It will be held from 7 to 9 p.m. on March 21 in the Wellesley Middle School auditorium, 50 Kingsbury St.

Both events will be co-hosted by Community Investors, a non-profit organization dedicated to serving the youth community.

"Wellesley Rocks," a group supporting local musicians, is co-hosting DodgeFest, and the Wellesley Youth Commission will co-host "The State of Play." No registration fees are required for either event, but voluntary contributions are welcomed to support no-fee afterschool programs at Wellesley Middle School and Wellesley Public School Parent Teacher Organizations.

"We look forward to hosting 'a day of play' and 'a night of perspective and reflection,'" said Joe Roberts, president of Community Investors. "While different experiences, both events will support our mission of helping kids connect, have fun and build life and leadership skills through community-based recreation."

A combination of recent trends inspired the creation of the organization and events. With the emergence of smartphones, social media, the Internet and video games, childhood inactivity and obesity have become national epidemics. Surprisingly, Massachusetts ranks last nationwide for high school students engaged in the recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity, according to the Massachusetts Health Policy Forum. Youths who are not enrolled in after-school programs are 50 percent more likely to experiment with drugs and alcohol, according to the Afterschool Alliance, a national nonprofit organization.

"As a Wellesley Middle School parent, I noticed that even though our school does a great job offering a wide variety of programs, there were still far too many kids not participating in afterschool ac-

tivities," said Roberts. "We also have a senior at the high school and in just a few years have noticed the significant increase in the 'lure' of electronics. As a parent, if you don't think it's a problem, you simply aren't paying attention."

A report by Common Sense Media, a nonprofit focused on helping children, parents and educators navigate the world of media and technology details the issue. Teens average 6 1/2 hours and tweens 4 1/2 hours consuming media on screens, including laptops, smartphones and tablets. And that doesn't include time using media at school or for homework.

"Fortunately, one of the solutions is simple - get kids engaged and active after school," said Roberts. With years of experience directing youth programs, he teamed with fellow Wellesley Middle School parent Chris Cavallerano, who helped bring the popular "BOKS" enrichment programs to the Wellesley elementary schools. They created Community Investors in 2014. Its afterschool program, "Straight Outta School Sports," offers flag football, soccer, dodgeball and basketball, free of charge to encourage participation.

"For adolescents, the time immediately after school is vital for being active and socializing," said Cavallerano. "The program gives them a positive outlet to disconnect from technology, have fun, blow off steam and socialize in person," Roberts adds. "Our goal is to provide each participant with a positive impactful experience every time they play. We call them P.I.E.s and we keep

track of every one of them because they all matter. With over 100 students enjoying a variety of sessions, we have 'served' over 1,000 P.I.E.s in just three semesters and look forward to many more."

David Lussier, the superintendent of Wellesley Schools, sees the potential of the program.

"We are always looking for new ways to expand opportunities for our students with as many experiences as possible. By partnering with Community Investors we are able to offer an additional afterschool outlet," said Lussier.

"We are happy to complement our after school offerings with a collaborative community partner," Wellesley Middle School Principal Mark Ito adds.

WMS METCO Coordinator Cynthia Russell is another fan.

"Our kids have loved the program. I see them coming out laughing, smiling and relaxed, feeling good and having fun," said Russell. The program also gives Wellesley High School students an opportunity to participate through its Coaching and Leadership Development Program.

"It gives them valuable experience as mentors and helps them develop leadership skills. It also empowers kids by giving them an opportunity to earn their own money," said Roberts.

While DodgeFest will celebrate The Power of Play, The "State of Play" event will address another mission of the organization: raising awareness and educating parents regarding trends, challenges and opportunities in youth sports. A 2014 George Washington University study found that 70 percent of children are dropping out

of organized sports by the age of 13, with the No. 1 reason that sports was no longer fun.

According to the study, "Today, adult-led competition dominates. Tryout-based, multi-season regional travel teams form as early as age 6, siphoning players and support from community-based recreational leagues striving to serve all kids. Nationwide, the trend is to prioritize performance over participation well before kids' bodies, minds and interests mature. The risks for the children are unnecessary and harmful stress, overuse injuries and burnout."

"Sports used to be the place where kids could relax and have fun," said Roberts. "Now it's just another pressure cooker. We are particularly concerned with the effect these trends have on younger children. One of the key issues we will discuss at 'State of Play' is to help parents gauge what levels of participation are appropriate at varying ages. For a teenager, dedicating time and energy to train and play a sport they love is incredibly beneficial. But for younger children, we believe there needs to be a greater emphasis on just having fun playing ball with kids from your town and having time to enjoy free play."

Both events are free of charge but do require registration. Information and registrations are available at communityinvestors.net.

— Robbie Johnson, Wellesley High School Class of 2008, is the founder and editor of the Wellesley Sports Blitz Blog, The Voice of Raiders Sports on The Wellesley Channel.