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Oregon State Legislature
House Committee on Business and Labor

February 24, 2020

Chair Barker, Vice Chairs Bynum and Barreto and members of the House Committee on Business and Labor.

My name is Nova Newcomer, I am a product of Oregon schools and the Executive Director of Friends of Baseball, a non profit whose mission is to enhance children's lives through baseball's power to teach.

I want to start by thanking you for your service on this committee – the work you do here is of great importance to the future of state and the people who live, work, and play here.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today about one of the great loves of my life. And to help reframe the way we think about “play” when it comes to investment in communities around our state.

I have many memories growing up playing ball. The 4 corners near home that us neighborhood kids made into a diamond for wiffle ball. The time I played centerfield because my catcher's knees were acting up and I caught the ball and fired it home to get the runner coming from third. Or simply playing catch with my dad on the blacktop of our apartment's parking lot. These and many other memories formed a foundation of connection and feeling part of something for me. As a child who spent time in foster care, experienced housing instability, and had parents who struggled with substance abuse disorder and mental health challenges – connection and feeling part of something were what I really needed.

In my role at Friends of Baseball, I had a recent experience that sparked these memories, along with reminding me why I believe in baseball's powerful connecting potential.

I was at University Park near Charles Jordan Community Center in North Portland where we hold our summer program. As we were packing up, a boy of about 10 rolled up on his bike and said, “You guys playing baseball?”
“Yes. You want to play a little catch?”
“Yes!”

So I grabbed a spare glove for him from the car and a bat...because...you know...everyone wants to hit.

And this boy and I played catch. I asked if he had played on a team and he said no. And yet he was fearless with the ball and had a great arm. All he was missing were a few mechanics. We talked and formed a little bond over ball and glove. Then I invited him up to the plate and offered to throw him 15 pitches before I had to head home.

The first pitch he swung and hit a grounder to short... dropped the bat, ran after it...as we just had one ball. Second pitch, hit...run to get it. Third pitch, the same and so on. If this young boy didn't hit 12 of the 15 pitches I threw him!

When he got on his bike it was magic hour at the field. I grabbed my glove and bat and walked back to my car thinking about how it's our PRESENCE...being out at the park in the summer, being on the blacktops and makeshift diamonds, that makes this work transformational and allows us to be there when kids like this boy ask if they “can play.”

And it's about so much more than just baseball. The work we do at Friends of Baseball in our after school and summer programs crosses over every critical policy issue you see before you in this legislative body and that elected officials are responsible for in communities across the state. From housing stability, to food scarcity, to giving kids an active outlet, to safe and supportive learning environments, to dismantling the harmful and systemic effects of racism —

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our program mentors are present with children every day after school and tell us how the failures of our social compact to take care of all Oregonians has a real and immediate impact on children.

I'll share a couple of examples:

Coach Chad Garber recently heard from one of our partners that a parent was asking about him. This mom shared with the school's site coordinator that her son had been in 4 schools in 4 years, but every day after Full Count, her son just talks the rest of the evening about Coach Chad. And his mom just wanted to make sure she had a chance to say thank you for giving her son that positive connection.

Or at a recent visit to one of our programs a couple weeks ago, I got to see Coach Gerald Bolden in his element. He noticed a young boy didn't participate in the end of program cheer, so he privately took him aside and asked him how he was doing. This boy's trust of his coach allowed him to share through tears that his grandfather had passed away. It would have been easy for Coach B to interpret the lack of participation in a negative way, but because of his deep empathy and respect for the young people he coaches, he was able to be an adult at his school who could be there for this boy in a critical moment.

So, we're not talking about baseball today, at the heart of it, we are talking about being a part of something. As a small, but mighty non profit, Friends of Baseball cannot do this work alone. It takes partnership likes the ones we have shared with social service agencies like Self Enhancement Inc, Latino Network, Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization, and Metropolitan Family Service. It takes the dedicated service of the young leaders who have served as Fellows in our program through a partnership with Multnomah County SummerWorks and have represented high schools like Jefferson, Roosevelt, Madison, Franklin, and more.

And it also takes funding to do what we do and a partner who deeply understands and supports the piece of the puzzle we are trying to provide to our community through the vehicle of baseball. A partner like Portland Diamond Project.

In 2020, our programs will serve over 3500 youth.

And in just 5 years since it launched, our Full Count program has reached 1000 youth. In 2020, our flagship after school and summer program will be in **24 sites in 5 school districts and 3 counties**, including a program supporting justice involved youth at Parrot Creek Residential Services in Clackamas.

Two things happened in 2017 that changed the course of our work. 1) Major League Baseball approached us about holding our first ever Play Ball Clinic in Portland. And 2) We received our first support from Portland Diamond Project. Those partnerships have only grown and since 2017, we have added 18 programs. And with that growth, we have remained committed to our focus on increasing access to the game for youth of color and for youth who experience financial exclusion -- making sure the game is accessible to all kids. **80% of the youth in our after school and summer programs are youth of color and over 75% of youth come from families who receive assistance through free and reduced price lunch programs.**

But it's not just the financial support from Portland Diamond Project that has made a difference – it's also their trust in our work as a community organization. When they invested in us, they came to us and asked what our priorities were for supporting youth and families in the community. And we said, "Our wait list for schools requesting Full Count after school and summer programs is at an all-time high. We need to be able to hire more coaches so we can serve more kids in more schools." And they said, "Yes" without hesitation.

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As one of Friends of Baseball's partners, Portland Diamond Project knows that recreational play for kids is not a bonus. Our nearly 15 years of experience in this field tells us that, for kids, PLAY is a safety net. And we can't keep expecting a different result doing things the way we have always done them. Kids can't wait for us to debate whether play needs to be a part of their every day. The science is in. Play is essential to the development of a child's brain.

Access to fun, active programs that help kids feel connected, help them reset their brains, and help them try something new is what you make possible. But supporting our programs also make being a part of something possible. Together we say to the young people in our community, "it's okay to dream big." We want to be part of those dreams.

Big dreams take big risks. And big risks take support. And that's exactly why we love bringing an opportunity to fail to thousands of young people. Because being temporarily bad at something is a chance to be taught. A chance to be seen and supported. A chance to try again to swing closer to that fence.

Since we began, Friends of Baseball has stuck to what we believe with a combination of connection and movement that propels us every day. After school, kids need opportunities to engage positively. They need to blow off steam, move their bodies and connect.

And the truth is it's not just kids who need this – families need these opportunities in our community to connect and feel a part of something. And there is no debate that Major League Baseball provides the most affordable and family-friendly experience in all of professional sports. We believe Portland Diamond Project's effort will help add that missing piece for Oregon families.

Bringing a Major League Baseball team in Oregon won't move the needle on its own on the issues that are keeping our communities from thriving. But what Friends of Baseball has seen from the group working to bring Major League Baseball to Portland in the way they have engaged with and supported our grassroots homegrown community organization, they are committed to investing in the future of our children and building community. And that is an investment that will echo through generations.

Thank you for swinging for the fences for kids in our community,

Nova Newcomer
Executive Director
Friends of Baseball

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