



For 18 Years, Bethesda Man Has Introduced Lacrosse to New Audiences

Jeff Wagner's summer programs have taught basic skills to kids from lower income neighborhoods

For 90 minutes a day at two summer camps in Silver Spring, kids who previously had no exposure to lacrosse were practicing throwing and catching rubber lacrosse balls with sticks.

Since 2000, Bethesda resident Jeff Wagner has operated this program as part of an all-day Montgomery County summer camp held at the Gwendolyn Coffield Community Recreation Center in Silver Spring. Four years ago, Wagner also began holding the camp—focused on the basic skills of the game—at the White Oak Community Recreation Center in Silver Spring. Most of the kids, ages 7 to 11, who take part in the program are black and Hispanic. Some have never heard of the sport, which despite a geographic expansion over the past two decades is still played mostly by white suburban kids. In Montgomery County, the best at the sport typically play for private schools such as Landon, Holton Arms, and Georgetown Prep, though programs at public schools have become more popular and competitive.

“These kids have no clue about the cultural inferences and connotations of lacrosse,” said Wagner, an advertising executive who was a 3-time All-Ivy League lacrosse player at Brown University in the 70’s.

“All we’re trying to do is turn them on to lacrosse and give them the basic skills they’ll need to eventually join a team.” Wagner estimates that about 1,500 kids have been introduced to lacrosse over the 15 years of the program, which he runs through his nonprofit Rosemary Hills Lacrosse Club. He hires high school and college-age players as counselors. Ryan Jones, the head counselor this year at the Coffield Center program, actually was a camper 14 years ago. He went on to play lacrosse for Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School and various club teams.

Wagner said he started the program when the Coffield Center first opened and was seeking activities and programs. He had founded the Bethesda Lacrosse Club in 1998, for which his daughter played.

“I realized I’d rather help those kids instead of these kids,” Wagner said. “If I had x amount of time and money to spend helping kids learn lacrosse, I should spend it on the kids who need it more.”

Wagner pays for most of the equipment and salaries of camp counselors, while the county has provided some funding in the past. Wagner also runs a fall after-school lacrosse program at Coffield.

Yolanda Blackwell, a county recreation specialist at the Coffield Center, said the programs are valuable mostly because they teach the kids something new.

“It isn’t necessarily the popular sport,” Blackwell said. “But the kids take to it. Even if just a few kids really picks it up, it makes it all worth it.”

Blackwell said she especially likes seeing the kids involved in the program in the summer come back in the fall and take a leadership role by teaching others new to the game.

Wagner wants to expand the program to five or six other county community centers. As the camp wound down earlier this month, Wagner said a camper named Miguel who also went through the program last summer asked him to play catch. Miguel easily threw and caught the ball using his right, dominant hand. Wagner told him to try throwing and catching with his non-dominant left hand, expecting him to struggle.

“He looks at me like, ‘You think I can’t do this left-handed?’ He had no problem,” Wagner said. “It doesn’t get any cooler than that.”