

The CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR®

WHY WE WROTE THIS

What does it take to launch a community organization? Herb Chasan's experience starting and running an after-school program shows what it takes – and how the rewards can be big.

DIFFERENCE MAKER

Hoops and Homework: One man shelves retirement for an after-school dream



Melanie Stetson Freeman/Staff

Herb Chasan founded Hoops and Homework in Framingham, Massachusetts, to give children a productive after-school space.

- By Nusmila Lohani Staff writer March 25, 2020

FRAMINGHAM, MASS.

Herb Chasan could have eased into retirement after spending 18 years teaching math to high school students, and another 30 years remodeling homes. But the octogenarian couldn't rest. He saw a need in the lower-income neighborhoods near his home in Framingham, and he wanted to meet it.

So Mr. Chasan founded Hoops and Homework, an after-school program that has provided activities and tutoring for youth up to age 14. Since 2012, Hoops and Homework has helped more than 300 children who otherwise would have gone home to empty houses or roamed the streets until their parents got off work.

Thanks to Mr. Chasan and a dedicated group of staff members and volunteers, the children instead have spent industrious afternoons making crafts, playing basketball, learning violin and yoga, gardening, and basking in the attention of a small army of tutors.

"Our goal is to help these kids break the cycle of poverty and jail – to have a good job, to be a success," says Mr. Chasan.



Melanie Stetson Freeman/Staff

Herb Chasan plays on the jungle gym with a boy from the neighborhood

As anyone who has launched a community organization knows, the work isn't easy – but the rewards can be big. "Expansion in after-school programs is very slow. It's very hard to keep programs running when reimbursement rates are low, especially for programs serving low-income families," says Ardith Wieworka, CEO of the Massachusetts Afterschool Partnership, an advocacy group.

There is huge demand for programs like Hoops and Homework, says Ms. Wieworka. “For every kid who’s in [a] program, there are two more kids in Massachusetts who would like to be in a program if one was available,” she says.

These days at Hoops and Homework, it’s not business as usual, of course. The regular after-school operations have been suspended amid the coronavirus outbreak. But Mr. Chasan is still working behind the scenes, and the organization hopes to proceed with expansion plans soon.

Before the outbreak brought activity to a halt, at 3 p.m. on a Wednesday, 10 children filed in to the organization’s Interfaith Terrace center and found their seats around a table. Homework came out of backpacks. The table quickly became a jumbled pile of books, crayons, and worksheets. The air was filled with chuckles and curious questions. The day’s volunteers – a married couple – spread out to assist the children with their work, ranging from numbers to science, or maybe an art project.

Fourth grader Jadiel Febus, who wants to be a YouTuber when he grows up, says his favorite activity at the center is basketball, while fifth grader and aspiring police officer Martin Garcia sings high praise of the flashcards and math table.



Melanie Stetson Freeman/Staff

The Hoops and Homework program has also offered opportunities for children to create artwork.

In a relatively recent development, a regional YMCA – drawing on a U.S. Department of Agriculture program – has partnered with Hoops and Homework to provide balanced suppers every day.

“We have a state-of-the-art kitchen that can produce hundreds and hundreds of meals. So we want to be able to feed kids after school and teach them how to have the [life] skills they need,” says Maggie Lynch, nutrition director at the MetroWest YMCA.

Hoops and Homework also has a partnership with Lovin’ Spoonfuls, a nonprofit in the Boston area dedicated to food rescue. According to Mr. Chasan, that organization has enabled the after-school program to continue providing meals for its most disadvantaged families during the coronavirus outbreak. Labeled bags of food are available for families to pick up at the door of Hoops and Homework sites.

Mr. Chasan says he is also working with the MetroWest YMCA on a takeout system.

Mr. Chasan has been a Framingham resident for 50 years, living about 15 minutes away from the two sites where the program is held. But it wasn’t until eight years ago that he stepped into one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods, when he was hanging up campaign posters for a friend running for local government. He noticed a run-down basketball court and a group of children loitering nearby with nothing to do.

He couldn’t shake the image from his mind, and it became the driving force for Hoops and Homework.

“Can you believe I never came to this neighborhood before 2012?” asks Mr. Chasan with a laugh.

Within a few months, he pitched his idea at a town hall meeting with a few others and secured \$81,000 in town funding to start Hoops and Homework. From then on, Mr. Chasan has captained a rigorous effort to sustain funding and expand the program.



Melanie Stetson Freeman/Staff

Neighborhood children play on the basketball court that Herb Chasan helped build for the after-school program

“He goes to all the people who are muckety-mucks in Framingham and may ask everybody for money,” says Annabel Dodd, Mr. Chasan’s close friend since the 1960s. He solicited restaurants, businesses, and city officials. “He was like a one-man show,” says Ms. Dodd. He made the program “his mission,” persevering through many obstacles.

It takes \$170,000 annually, about \$5,600 per child, to run both centers. The sum is met through fundraising and donations, as well as through vouchers from the state.

To realize a playground at the Interfaith Terrace center in 2018, Mr. Chasan worked with Ricky Finlay, a board member at the time. They acquired a grant to pay for the equipment, but the labor to build the playground came at zero cost.

“We had ... politicians, union labor, carpenters. We had the school superintendents. You name it, just the community came together,” says Mr. Finlay, who estimates the turnout was close to 200 volunteers.

Hoops and Homework has encouraged people from different parts of the community to volunteer during the after-school sessions because they can tell the children “someday, you may be doing that job,” says Judy Wester, the organization’s on-call health consultant. “We love to have role models come in.”

Last year Paul Gildea, deputy chief at the Framingham Fire Department, heard about the program from someone at work. Shortly afterward, he visited the Pusan center, the second Hoops and Homework site. He enjoyed it so much that he began volunteering every Thursday.

“The kids seem to open up ... asking me to participate in games and stuff,” he says.

The families that participate in the program live at housing complexes located near the two sites. Many cannot afford the transportation costs to other after-school programs in Framingham.

Darlene Jette is a single parent who lives next door to the Pusan center. She has sent her two children, a 7-year-old son and 8-year-old daughter, to Hoops and Homework since 2013. “I love how they are hands-on with arts and crafts,” says Ms. Jette.

The program goes beyond helping children. Most of the staff members are bilingual, which enables them to serve the largely Spanish-speaking community, which hails mostly from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic.

“My English is not good,” says Keila Cupid, a parent who lives close to the Interfaith Terrace center. But the mother of 11-year-old Crisaly Cupid is clear in expressing her gratitude for Hoops and Homework: “[It’s] a safe space for my daughter when I am away to my English class.”