

HOOPS 4 HOPE- BASKETBALL AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN CAPE TOWN



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This past summer I used my Burch Fellowship to travel to Cape Town, South Africa to work for a basketball and youth development minded non-profit organization called Hoops 4 Hope. I got inspired for this experience during a previous semester abroad in Cape Town, where I interned for an NGO called Abalimi Bezekhaya. Abalimi supports urban farmers in the township communities outside the city of Cape Town that were the destination for displaced black and colored peoples during the apartheid era of South African history.

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Today, 20 years after the end of apartheid, these communities still experience high rates of poverty and other challenges that stem from decades of denied opportunities and institutionalized injustice. In the last week of the semester in Cape Town, I read a local magazine article profiling Hoops 4 Hope and found my way to its gym and local headquarters in the township of Crossroads. At the gym that day I met one of the Hoops 4 Hope coaches, Thabo, played basketball with his youth team, and spent hours discussing the challenges faced and successes achieved by the organization. Thabo told me that if I found a way to come back, he would put me to work. I left the gym that afternoon, and a few days later the country of South Africa, but remained enamored with how perfectly Hoops 4 Hope combined distinct passions of mine-- I've played and loved the sport of basketball as long as I can remember, and in recent years have begun coaching youth basketball, working at summer camps,



and guiding adventure travel trips with local high school students. Hoops 4 Hope, I realized, was the perfect intersection between sports and youth development, and did its work in the challenging environment of the Cape Town townships. This environment was one I had begun to know past the level of a naïve outsider during my semester abroad, and desperately wanted to connect to further.

Beyond my initial interests, I was curious to explore the effect that Hoops 4 Hope could have in combatting the array of social ills that dense, persistent poverty had brought to the Cape Town townships. I could see that poverty had become deeply woven into the township communities and that, while it itself is not an easily eradicated condition, the manifestations of poverty, such as the disillusionment that

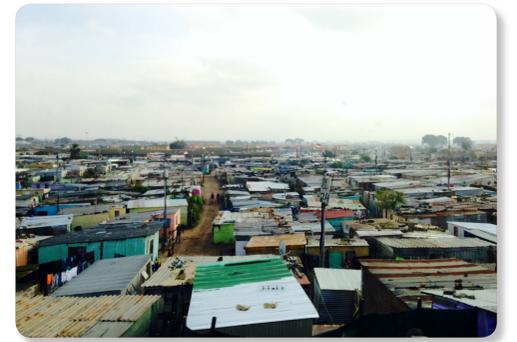
it causes young people, are conditions that can be fought.

Hoops 4 Hope fights these conditions by targeting young people who otherwise may fall prey to the callings of the streets and surrounding them with positive role models and focused peers. With circle discussions about important issues and life-skills training imbedded in basketball drills, Hoops 4 Hope places itself at the crux between sports and life. Excited to see their work first-hand and assist in their mission, I applied for the Burch Fellowship, and returned to Cape Town on May 31, 2014.

Even with previous experience in the townships, I knew I had to enter into the Hoops 4 Hope space balancing my position as an outsider of relative privilege with a genuine desire to serve without usurping agency and build friendships without question of authenticity or ephemerality.

Upon arrival, I came to find out that the long-time director of the organization left Cape Town for a job with NBA Africa, leaving Hoops 4 Hope in a rebuilding phase. I teamed up with the three men running the organization and discovered that we offset each other nicely. My three co-workers had grown up in the townships, experiencing the same life conditions as the young people we served, and were in a far better position than I to realistically mentor, guide, and spark meaningful, life-skills discussions. At the same time, life circumstances had prevented each of the three from advancing to university, and meant that they were not particularly comfortable writing in English. Thus, I was able to provide services to the paper side of the organization—writing grants, communicating with international partners, and recruiting on future volunteers—that were perhaps lacking.

While I originally envisioned a more active coaching and mentoring role for the organization, I came to appreciate that the office-based role I was asked to assume played to each of our strengths, while also preserving local agency for the important hands-on work done in the



community. I was also invited to get involved in unique and challenging ways. I helped organize a June 16th Youth Day Tournament that commemorated a string of 1976 apartheid protests and brought together teams from all over the townships. In July, we hosted a group of Brooklyn teens at Hoops 4 Hope and I acted as a liaison, bringing them together with our local Hoops 4 Hope teens to perform a service project at a local pre-school.

After work, I would often join my coworkers Thabo or Madoda in their neighborhoods. We would shoot hoops outside or play pool at local shebeens. I stayed at Thabo's house one night, and in a unique blending of worlds, stayed up until three in the morning to watch Game 4 of the NBA finals taking place back home on the east coast.

Ultimately, I discovered that in certain cases Hoops 4 Hope provided a direct pathway to a more gainful future for the youth it served, such as in the case of Sizla, who tried out for and made a regional youth basketball academy that doubles as a reputable high school, or Litha, who left for Canada on a basketball scholarship to attend an academically elite prep school. For dozens of others touched by the organization, basketball itself may not be the vehicle to a better future, but the values imbued in the game and taught by Hoops 4 Hope are doing immeasurable good for this population of young people raised in an environment conducive to challenges.

As for myself, I left South Africa with a renewed fervor for cross-cultural interaction, an appreciation for balancing agency when serving abroad, and a better understanding of the critical link between sports and youth development.

