



Washington DC Youth Rugby continues to build community and impact the district's youth

By Samuel Lee

On a chilly Friday night, when temperatures dropped to 20-degrees, over 100 people gathered inside the Eastern Market in Southeast D.C. to celebrate Washington DC Youth Rugby's 19th anniversary.

The celebration was also the non-profit organization's first fundraiser since the COVID-19 pandemic and raised over \$15,000 to continue offering free rugby programs to all children in the district.

The organization has tackle rugby programs for middle school and high school students at The Fields at RFK in Northeast D.C.

It also has multiple programs for children ages five to 14 at multiple locations, and has held clinics at Turkey Thicket Recreation Center, Maury Elementary School and Apple Tree in Northeast D.C., and Good Projects in Southwest D.C.

However, the event felt more like a family reunion than anything else. It was lively and frenetic with multiple overlapping conversations and laughter filling the room while little children were screaming and chasing after each other.

"Everyone is pretty friendly with each other, despite [rugby] looking like a violent sport. Everyone is a big family, regardless of race or class," said Brandon Burch, an alumnus who played with the club from 2007 to 2009.

That sense of community has been at the heart of the organization.

Brian Mihelic, president of Washington DC Youth Rugby, and others often emphasized how once you've entered the rugby community, you will always find a place to belong no matter where you are or where you're from.

"[Rugby's] culture of being welcoming and being accepting of people is second to none pretty much anywhere," said Luc Hale, a player with the Washington Football Rugby club, the adult club affiliated with the youth organization.

Since starting in 2004 with just seven children, the organization has grown into a diverse group of hundreds of boys and girls from multiple different neighborhoods like Columbia Heights, Brookland, Capitol Hill and Edgewood.

Most of the children are Black, 54 percent, and White and Latino children make up 24 percent and six percent. Young girls also account for about 10 percent, a number that the organization hopes to increase.

“We have kids from diverse backgrounds that would’ve never known each other despite living so close to each other that are now friends... It diversifies the group, and it makes the community and the city stronger,” said Mihelic.

And the strength of this community was put on full display during the pandemic as it worked alongside the Atlas Foundation to donate \$5,000 in Giant gift cards to families in need.

It isn’t just rugby that bonds and strengthens this community. It is also the organization’s investment into its young athletes.

Former players like Burch learned valuable lessons playing rugby that motivate them to stay involved with the organization, and that makes more families eager to join.

“I learned that I can go places. My craft or whatever profession I chose could take me outside of myself,” said Burch.

Rugby isn’t a very popular sport among high school students in the U.S. In [2019](#), over a million students played football and nearly 940,000 played basketball. In the [same year](#), almost 26,500 students played rugby.

However, rugby’s lack of popularity makes it a unique sport for young athletes. Beyond teaching skills such as teamwork and leadership, Mihelic said that it opens the children’s minds by trying something that they haven’t tried before.

In doing so, it instills children with self-confidence and helps keep them focused on looking forward towards something.

“Rugby changed my life. It opened the world to me, and I wanted to give that back to the community,” said Mihelic.