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By Ian Lemmonds

The Skateboard Ramp in The Greenlaw Community Center

The Winter Olympics contained sports unfamiliar to many people. So the idea of coming up with a back story for the athletes was remarkable. These stories draw the viewer in and establish a human connection to athletes from all over the world. As I prepare to leave the house for a visit to the Greenlaw Community Center in Memphis, I can't help but think of one such story. It's about an Afghan child who (on vacation with his family) tied boards to his feet to try and ski. A local skier saw him, and decided to procure some skis for him. Roll the clock forward fifteen years, and that boy is now a young man competing in the Winter Olympics. I can't help but wonder what would have happened (or not happened) if that onlooker had decided it would be easier to ignore the boy than to get him some skis.



Kids wait for their turn to skate.

Some sports have a much larger fanbase than those in the Winter Olympics: there are an estimated 11 million skateboarders in the United States. It's a relatively new sport, which gained prominence in the late seventies, bloomed in the eighties, dipped in the nineties, and exploded in the 2000's. Pro Skater Tony Hawk is not only a household name, but a big time brand, whose endorsements are sought due to his prominence in the sport as well as his wholesome family-friendly image.

The 2000's have ushered in an entirely different kind of skater: grown-ups. They have families, jobs, and lead responsible lives as active members of their communities. The only thing they lack is an actual place to skate: Memphis has no skateparks.

One of these grown-ups is Aaron Shafer. He's a doctor – a researcher who spends his days at St. Jude working on solutions to viral epidemics that plague humans worldwide. He spends his nights on a skateboard ramp in his backyard. Recently, with the help of the **Memphis Athletic Ministries**, Aaron got the chance to test a theory: If you put skateboard ramps in Memphis Communities the kids will benefit from them. His idea was that skateboarding could actually make the communities better.

There are many who disagree with him. There are those who say our inner city youth aren't interested in skateboarding. I open the door of the Greenlaw Community Center and hear the familiar sound of young people playing. Many of these sounds emanate from the doorway in front of me – the entrance to the basketball courts, where the next Magic, Jordan, or Kobe are practicing. I peek into the gym just as a young man drives to the basket, attempting some crazy backwards 360 layup attempt. He doesn't even come close to making it.

“That was nice,” one player says, “How much for lessons?”

When I turn around, where I see another young group gathered around a large doorway. I make my way through the crowd to see what everyone is buzzing about. It's a brand-new skateboard ramp. This being the first day of the new ramp's completion, I'm wondering if Aaron's “field of dreams” theory is true: if you build it, they will skate.

There are a lot of young kids on the ramp, decked out in pads and helmets. They are clearly new at this. They wobble, struggling to maintain their balance as they slowly skate back and forth across the ramp. Two instructors stand among the crowd overseeing things and offering words of encouragement.



Mark Jannetta helps a young man drop-in for the first time.

As I stand here watching, Aaron shows up. “Isn't it great?” he says, “That's **Mark Jannetta**,” he says, pointing to one of the instructors. “He works for **Memphis Athletic Ministries**.”

Recently, the **Memphis Athletic Ministries (MAM)** took over four community centers the city was planning to shut down. The ramp is part of a pilot program, designed to promote athletics in Memphis communities. The skateboards, helmets, and pads are all provided to the kids by **MAM** and Skatelife Memphis.

Suddenly I am struck with the notion that if I come back in six weeks, some of these kids I'm watching now might be getting pretty good. I jokingly tell Aaron that "some of these kids might be skating better than you before too long."



"I hope so," he says as he pushes a young girl on a skateboard across the ramp, "That's what this is about."

No one knows for sure what's going to happen in Greenlaw. But I'm struck with the idea that a door is open that wasn't here yesterday. I'm also confronted with the laws of youth: the more doors of opportunity the better. Whether it's skateboarding, basketball, or anything else, kids need healthy options. The more the better.

Who knows what the impact could be? Could the person who got the Afghan child skis have predicted that child would grow up and compete in the Olympics? One thing that is for sure, if he hadn't, that child would definitely not have grown up to compete in the Olympics.

And what if a little ramp in Greenlaw ends up having an impact? Who knows- ten years from now maybe someone from the Greenlaw community skates in the X-Games? No one can be sure, of course, what impact the Greenlaw ramp will have, or if it *will* have an impact.

One thing that is for sure: a possibility is here today that didn't exist yesterday, and children thrive on possibility.
