

## More Than A Game

It began with a love for the game of basketball, but quickly turned into a life lesson in diversity and acceptance. Since the age of four, my son Chip, has been a basketball fanatic. He loves watching the game, he loves playing the game, he truly loves everything about basketball. As a basketball mom, I never imagined some of the tough conversations we would end up having around race after practices.

At the young age of five, there were limited options with basketball clinics in the area where we live, so I started to look elsewhere to get him more involved with the sport. Through a friend I found out about the Silver Spring Neighborhood Center (SSNC), located off of Silver Spring and 64th Street. The mission behind SSNC is to help families and individuals of Northwest Milwaukee become self-sufficient by offering programs for every stage and phase of life. From after school programs, to a food pantry and literacy services, these are just a few of the many things offered at the center. Additionally they offer a variety of sport programs for children, including basketball.

In 2017 Chip began attending basketball clinics at SSNC, immediately loving the program. Chip was the only white child there. During the Monday evening leagues there typically would be 50 children: Chip and 49 black children. I will admit, that at first I felt out of place being in the stands watching games. How could I not, when my entire life I had always found myself in places being with the majority, and now I was in the minority. With how segregated Milwaukee is, it sadly isn't surprising that someone raised on the North Shore would feel this way. I finally understood what my black friends meant when they said it was awkward for them being the only black people at events.

While the basketball programs are amazing, it was the realization that my child was benefiting from this socially as well which kept us coming back to the program. I made a promise to myself that I would never mention the race difference to Chip until he brought it up. It took three years until he finally noticed enough to ask about it at the age of eight.

"Hey mom," Chip sheepishly said. "How come I'm the only white kid on the team? Are black people better at basketball and that's why?"

My stomach dropped and I thought, where do I even begin answering this question. My mind was spinning. I knew this conversation would eventually happen, but in that moment, all the well thought out responses I had crafted in my head over the years simply vanished. Instead I looked at him and said, "Well do you enjoy playing with the group of kids here? Do you consider them your friends?"

“What? Yes of course they are my friends! I’ve been playing with them for years now. We have fun together, plus they all laugh at my jokes. The team is really good at basketball. But I just don’t get why I’m the only white kid,” Chip responded.

Do I tell him that it’s because people are scared of driving through the area to get to SSNC? Do I say that it’s because regardless of all the positive movement towards a unified country, that we are still a very divided country? How far do I go with this conversation on a Wednesday evening at 7pm with an eight-year-old child?

“Well bud, we were really lucky to find this program,” was how I began my monologue. “Not everyone is as open-minded to the idea of playing basketball where this program is located. We have made some good friends through the program and have learned that skin color shouldn’t divide people. I’m glad you have friends that live in different areas of town and go to different schools. I can’t speak to why other people don’t send their children here. But what I know for sure, is that I’m happy our family participates in the basketball offered here.”

That seemed to answer his question for the evening. But for me it only reaffirmed that he was learning so much more than just basketball from this program. He was learning to be comfortable in a room full of people who looked nothing like him. He was making friends with people from different social and economic backgrounds. He was naturally learning to accept everyone regardless of our differences because he now had this in his background.

Fast-forward to 2021 and we have continued on with the SSNC program. Chip, now 10, has made some more friends and I no longer feel like I stand out as the only white mother. As much as Chip learned from this experience, I have learned even more.

