

Bringing Communities Together in Waterbury Through Basketball



Are sports a force for good?

Can sports such as basketball really bring people together and teach values such as sportsmanship, mutual respect, teamwork, and working for the greater good in the community? Well, the reality is that we often over-romanticize the power of sports. For example, think of how James Earl Jones' character in Field of Dreams described baseball: "This game, it reminds us of all that once was good and could be again." Unfortunately the fact is, not all is good in the world of sports where we now have a win-at-all-cost mentality, poor sportsmanship on the field, on the court, and in the stands, and the over-commercialization of sports

where money rules and playing for the sake of play goes by the wayside. As The Athletic reported in October of 2021, we're even at the point where youngsters 12 to 14 years of age are approached by sports agents and pushy parents are attempting to groom their kids – unrealistically – for a lucrative professional sports career. As one child psychiatrist put it in a New York Times article: "Parenting has become the most competitive sport in America."

We often give sports far too much credit as something that can solve society's problems. But sports alone can't rid society of poverty, crime, violence, illiteracy, and poor health.

But here's the good news. Under the right circumstances and with the right people involved, sports can indeed be a true force for good and make a difference in people's lives and in their communities. As you read this, there are a number of individuals and groups in Waterbury CT who have been doing so for quite some time specifically through the game of basketball. It is a shining example of what sports, at its very best, is all about.

Exceptional people, outstanding organizations

We're going to tell you about an extraordinary league – The Pearl Street League -- which was a hotbed of outstanding basketball competition for a long time and has brought players, coaches, families, and fans together in the spirit of healthy competition.

We'll tell you about dedicated people who spearheaded an effort to refurbish Waterbury's Martin Luther King Memorial Park basketball courts that had been in disrepair for a long time. They are making these courts a safe and welcoming place to play.

We'll tell you about an organization – Full Court Peace -- that actually did the refurbishing and has done similar projects across the country, overseas and elsewhere and does so for the purpose of promoting peace and harmony though basketball.

We'll tell you about a remarkable individual from Waterbury – the late Hubie Williamson -- a community activist who worked for years to improve the lives of people in his community.

And, we'll tell you about a group of former Waterbury athletes – the Lettermen Club – who have led the effort to dedicate the newly refurbished MLK Park courts to Hubie Williamson at an event that is coming up on September 17th.

Now, let's take a closer look.

Hubie Williamson – the man who started it all

The late Hubie Williamson was the individual behind much of what you're about to read. Fully recounting his life and accomplishments would take up far more space than we have in this publication, so we'll just give you the highlights.

Hubie Williamson was born in Waterbury. He graduated from Crosby High School and North Carolina College and was a star basketball player at both.

Hubie spent a lifetime working to improve the lives of people throughout his community – in particular, the youth of Waterbury. He was an outspoken and tireless community activist and advocate dedicated to creating social change and promoting racial healing.

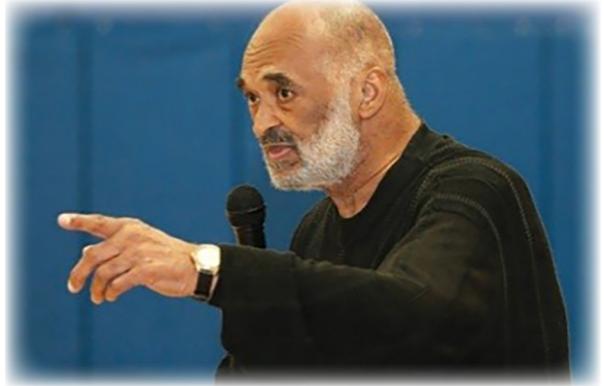
Among the things he did:

- Was the Center Director for New Opportunities for Waterbury, Inc., an organization whose social services programs work to eliminate poverty and assist people in need
- Advocated for more minority representation on decision making groups within Waterbury's political arena
- Helped calm North End neighborhoods after three days of rioting in 1969
- Founded The Lettermen – an organization of former Waterbury athletes actively involved in projects and programs to improve their community
- Started the legendary Pearl Street basketball League



The Pearl Street League – a safe haven for great basketball

Hubie Williamson founded the Pearl Street Summer League in 1974 while he was director of the Pearl Street Neighborhood House in Waterbury. His goal was to bring youth together by giving them a safe place to play and hopefully, as a result, stay off the streets so as not to participate in various kinds of illegal activities. The league served as a refuge from the problems and dangers of life in the inner city and helped combat the ill effects of racial divisions that were prevalent. The league, however, wasn't only about playing basketball but about putting school first and motivating youngsters to focus on getting good grades and maintaining a high level of attendance at school. The league proved so popular it went beyond just playing in the summer while adding divisions for kids of all ages. Soon, the league attracted top players from beyond Waterbury and throughout the Northeast. They hosted holiday tournaments pitting Waterbury schools against some of the top teams in the State.



All the while, Hubie Williamson kept the league focused on education and diversity, which was one of the reasons he symbolically chose the courts at Martin Luther King Park as home base for the league.

The Pearl Street League's popularity and reputation grew exponentially and began to attract college players. Before the league was started in 1974, this was not permitted, according to Waterbury attorney Joe Summa. Joe has been actively involved in a number of community projects, including the rebuild of the MLK Park basketball courts and renaming them after Hubie Williamson. Joe was also an outstanding player on the Sacred Heart High School basketball team who won the Class A State Championship in 1967 and a star at Wesleyan University, becoming the first Wesleyan player inducted into the New England Basketball Hall of Fame. Joe tells us, "When I played in college, the NCAA would not allow you to play summer leagues while you were still a student. This was a response to gambling scandals involving college players from New

York schools including Columbia, St. John's and NYU. The NCAA eventually dropped that ban in 1973, but then limited summer league play to no more than two players from any given college team. Shortly afterwards, the NCAA ended all their limitations." The Pearl Street League opened their doors not only to college players but players from the NBA – not unlike the Pro-Am summer league in Hartford.

Where to play and what's happened to the courts at MLK Park

As noted earlier, the Pearl Street Summer League began play outdoors at Waterbury's Martin Luther King Park. To appreciate the significance of this fact, you need some historical context. In April of 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis. Racial tensions and rioting which were already rampant across the country intensified, and Waterbury was not spared. Consequently, to help ease those tensions, members of the local Black Youth Movement in Waterbury proposed creating an inner city park and naming it after Dr. King. It took until 1973 to get this project started and, ultimately, the park and the basketball courts were built. Eventually, the crowds became too large for the MLK Park area, so the league moved to City Mills and later Lakewood Park to accommodate those crowds.

Over the years, the outdoor courts at the park deteriorated through neglect. Rather than let that continue, a few groups and individuals got together to implement a project to refurbish the courts. These groups include the A13 Leadership Academy and the Full Court Peace organization.

The A13 Leadership Academy is a foundation whose goal is to produce future leaders on and off the court and teaches children the importance of discipline, working hard and working together to help themselves and their communities. The Foundation was started by Anthony Ireland, a former star basketball player at Crosby High School and at Loyola Marymount University. He's been active over the years in a variety of community projects. Joe Summa is an old friend of Ireland's and got involved with his foundation and the two have been heavily involved in the renovating the park and redoing the basketball courts.

Full Court Peace is an organization devoted to building unity and community through basketball in Connecticut and New York City and as they say on their web site, "sees a county-wide interconnected basketball community that serves all populations regardless of race or socio-economic status."

Courts at MLK Park before and after refurbishing



Mike Evans is the founder and executive director. His journey and his organization have taken some interesting twists and turns. Mike grew up in Weston CT and played basketball for Weston High School and after that for Hamilton College. In an effort to keep playing, he went to, of all places, Belfast Ireland. Mike told us, "I lived in Belfast and coached Catholic high schools in a segregated society. I started coaching at Protestant schools without telling the other schools, which I had to do because the Catholics and Protestants in

Ireland were at war with one another. It's then that I got the idea of that we could bring down the barriers between people through basketball." Mike got invited to Cuba in 2009 to assess the social significance of basketball. Baseball has long been huge in Cuba, but what about basketball? Mike was supposed to find out. In the course of doing so he made numerous trips to Havana to repair their basketball courts and help the locals start a league. Now more than 300 youngsters are playing in that league. Mike's organization has done similar work in the Dominican Republic, Panama and in Wyoming on native American reservations. And of course the organization does similar work in New York and Connecticut, including the courts at MLK Park.

Dedicating the courts at MLK Park to Hubie Williamson

Now that the MLK park courts have been refurbished, they look great. But there's more here than meets the eye. To underscore the benefits of a community resource such as MLK Park and the role of basketball in uplifting the Waterbury community, an organization called The Lettermen Club spearheaded an effort to have the courts named for Hubie Williamson who founded the club, which consists of former Waterbury black athletes who are heavily involved in a broad range of projects and activities to benefit their community.

The naming and dedication ceremony will take place on Saturday, September 17, 2022 at Martin Luther King Park in Waterbury. It will be an inspirational event and if you can clear your calendar, try and attend. You'll be glad you did.



Hubie Williamson passed away on September 14, 2020 at the age of 82. Though he is gone, his legacy lives on in the results of his advocacy for racial justice and improving the lives of disadvantaged youngsters and adults in his hometown of Waterbury and beyond.

Editor's note: This article was written by Ken Devoe with significant contributions from Joe Summa and Mike Evans.