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Alison Craiglow Hockenberry Contributing editor at Ashoka's Changemakers

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## Serious Play: The Goal Is Peace

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Jürgen Griesbeck plays hard because of a murder. After his friend Andrés Escobar, a Colombian national soccer player, was killed for botching a goal in a 1994 World Cup game, Griesbeck set to work making sure the game itself -- football, as most of the world calls it -- became an agent for helping to end violence.

"When I heard the news about Andrés it was about five in the morning and it hurt so deeply," Griesbeck said. He started Football for Peace in Escobar's hometown, Medellín, which was at the time one of the most dangerous and violent cities in the world. The program brought at-risk kids together to play under rules decided democratically by the players

on both teams, a process that encouraged collaboration, peaceful conflict resolution, gender equality, and inclusion. Within a few short years, 10,000 kids in and around Medellín were playing Football for Peace. "I think, in Medellín, it was the first time people from a background of conflict were brought together, and it was football that did it," he said. "We have aimed to make possible the impossible."

And the possibilities are endless. Study after study has shown that kids who are involved in sports are more likely to be successful, healthy, productive members of their community. They learn and internalize the value of tolerance, teamwork, discipline, and leadership, and kids who play are less likely to be involved in gangs, crime, and extremist activity.

Griesbeck watched those statistics come to life in Colombia. After a few years of growing success, he handed the reins of the project over to trained local leaders (who continue to run and support the organization) and brought the concept to his home country of Germany. There, he called it Football for Tolerance and tailored it to confront the growing, violent xenophobia among young Germans.

Countless sports-for-change initiatives around the world are steering kids away from violence, hatred, and extremism. In the Palestinian territories, for example, Hani Qattan founded PACES: Step Away From Potential Extremism to "create sanctuaries for children to feel safe, learn, and be productive in," said Qattan.

"The central problem for Palestinian children is lack of direction and hope. If a child is left idle on the street, he or she [is] then exposed to drugs, smoking, and ... to extremism that may result in violence," Qattan said of PACES. "We provide an alternative for the children by having programs that they can go to instead of being unsupervised on the streets with no hope or direction."

Taking that idea in another direction, the Twinned Peace Sport School brings over 2,000 Palestinian and Israeli kids together on teams to play and compete. Each year, the program holds a "Mini World Cup," bringing together about 80 mixed teams and a supportive, diverse audience. The hope embodied in this friendly competition also draws spectators from the region's diplomatic community.

J.D. Walsh started a similar program with basketball as the centerpiece, Hoops for Health, in the conflict-ridden region of Kashmir. Working with the non-profit Chinar, Walsh brought together Pakistani and Indian kids who had been orphaned by violence. It didn't matter that the kids had never even seen a basketball game before, let alone played it. "These kids had gone through various traumatic conditions, maybe seen something bad happen," said Chinar's president Nazir Ahmed Qureshi. "These children become easy recruits for all sorts of violent causes. Chinar seeks to end that cycle."

In Guatemala, for example, children in Kaqchikel were regularly walking a dangerous two-mile trek along a highway to get to the closest ball field. Tragically, three had been killed by cars along the way. Kids in other villages were compelled to follow their passion for football in makeshift fields strewn with broken glass and toxic sewage. To make playing football safer and more accessible, love.futbol taps into local resources and recruits area volunteers to plan and build playing fields and run youth teams. The organization worked to help Kaqchikel and other Guatemalan towns construct their own permanent fields, which are now fully locally run.

For Somali girls in refugee camps in Kenya, the desire to play exists, but culturally appropriate sportswear did not. Girls missing out on the joys and benefits of sports turned out to be a design problem. A team of women designers from Nike who had visited the camp partnered with the UN high commissioner for refugees to spearhead Together for Girls, a solution that puts refugee girls and women in charge of designing and making sports uniforms suitable for Muslim girls and women who wear a full traditional hijab.

"Playing sports gives our girls a break from their daily life" and builds self esteem, explained Adar Osman Horar, a leader in the Dadaab refugee camp. "If they take part in sports activities linked to the schools, more girls will also continue to go to school."

These kinds of solutions and initiatives are everywhere. Griesbeck, following on the successes of his football programs in Colombia and Germany, recognized that the power of small local organizations all over the world would grow significantly if there were an organized global platform for like-minded leaders to share insights and experiences and work together to promote the sport as a pathway to peace and justice. He felt the sport needed to be taken more seriously as an agent for change, so he formed StreetFootballWorld, which unites dozens of organizations around the world that promote football as a means to tackle violence, intolerance, HIV/AIDS, crime, homelessness, and other social challenges.

The organization has numerous key partners, including the influential world football governing body Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), which embraced Griesbeck's dream and officially integrated football for social change into its World Cup agenda.

Jürgen Griesbeck may have lost a friend to violence, but with his organization shooting to reach two million at-risk young people through football by 2015, his legacy, and his friend's, is a goal worth cheering long and hard for.

..... All of the initiatives mentioned above are participants in Ashoka's Changemakers global community of social change or members of Ashoka's fellowship of social entrepreneurs.

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