



**RICHARD E.
LAPCHICK**

Basketball Without Borders brings hoops, hope, help to Africa

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I need to start out with three disclaimers. I am the son of a pioneering NBA coach. I am someone who has been in love with the continent of Africa for more than 40 years. Finally, I have spent most of my adult life in programs that try to use sport as a vehicle for social responsibility and assist communities in becoming safer, healthier and better places. That being said, I believe everything that follows is still objective and accurate.



NBAE
Grizzlies center Hasheem Thabeet helps hang a mosquito bed net in Rufisque, Senegal.

I recently returned from my 35th trip to Africa. This time it was with the Basketball Without Borders program led by the NBA. In terms of social responsibility on an international level, few organizations are comparable to what the NBA has done and none are comparable on the continent of Africa. The NBA has opened a new office in Johannesburg for the continent. The office is led by Amadou Fall, who was previously an executive with the Dallas Mavericks and himself is a son of Senegal.

The Basketball Without Borders program in Africa has been going strong throughout the last decade. I was lucky enough to be able to help bring the NBA to South Africa for the first time in 1993 and 1994 with players Dikembe Mutombo, Alonzo Mourning, Patrick Ewing and John Sparks and coaches Wes Unseld and Lenny Wilkens. Commissioner David Stern and Charlie Grantham, who was the National Basketball Players Association executive director at that time, were pivotal in arranging the first two trips. I loved watching how the NBA was exposed to what Africa was. In the case of South Africa, it was a nation that epitomized racism for a century and was being transformed into a democracy led by Nelson Mandela, perhaps one of the greatest leaders of all time.

Basketball Without Borders, which was established in 2001, will stretch its reach into other African countries in the years ahead. Amadou has planned how the expansion will take place, and this year what happened in Senegal was heartwarming. The 60 best African male players and 40 top female basketball players from Senegal participated in skills programs in the morning, learned life skills in the afternoon and contributed in community development/social responsibility projects at the end of each day.

Senegal, located on the westernmost part of Africa, is a particularly historic place where slaves were shipped from the fort on Goree Island. All of us went to Goree and heard and felt the chilling details of how 20 million Africans, the youngest and strongest of the continent, were taken from Africa and brought to the Americas, or died in the process. It is typical of programming of the NBA that they emphasized this as the starting point of the trip. Last year in Johannesburg, the trip began with a visit to the Apartheid Museum so that the players understood the role of apartheid and the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

The component of social responsibility was reflected in Senegal by players helping to dedicate the new basketball court where one of the players along on the trip, Charlotte Bobcats center DeSagana Diop, had grown up. Another player on the trip, Luc Mbah a Moute of Cameroon, attended one of the first Basketball Without Borders camps and is now a veteran with the Milwaukee Bucks.

All the players and coaches spent an afternoon helping to hang mosquito nets in the homes of people in Rufisque, a village near Dakar. It was part of the Nothing But Nets program and literally helps save lives. One million people died last year of malaria, a thoroughly preventable disease. The Legacy Project, part of the NBA Cares program in which the NBA helps build a permanent piece of infrastructure in a community, allowed for the expansion of the Dakar YMCA to give it computer capabilities as well as better classrooms and a refurbished basketball court so that the children will be able to spend their afternoons safely at the Y.

Basketball is the sport that in our Racial and Gender Report Cards leads all other leagues in terms of racial and gender hiring practices for both the NBA and WNBA. Furthermore, the NBA employs Kathy Behrens as a senior vice president for social responsibility, a position that does not exist in any other league. Elsa Lopez is the senior director for vendor diversity, which again, to my knowledge, is a position that does not exist in any other league.

The NBA Cares program is in every community where an NBA team plays. It has an impact that is readily seen in those communities. Through its Basketball Without Borders program, it works not only in Africa but also in Asia and Europe and potentially in other areas of the world. It has been in 10 countries in five continents.

Good comes as a result of a socially responsible league that does good business. Which is why this son of an NBA coach, who loves Africa and believes in the social responsibility of sport, tips his hat to Stern and all those who work for him.