

## BOYS &amp; GIRLS CLUB OF GREATER LOWELL

# ‘IT’S LIKE POETRY IN MOTION’

## Teens play in Peace League

By Aaron Curtis

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**LOWELL »** While standing court-side at the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell on July 15 — a basketball game taking place a few feet away — 18-year-old club member Kilmonte Donkor looks for the words to describe his love for basketball.

“It’s like poetry in motion,” the Lowell teen concludes.

Donkor and several other teens, club staff members and volunteers are at the club gym on July 15 to partake in the Peace League. The summer basketball league — which has been around for about 15 years

— at the local Boys & Girls Club is for youth ages 13 to 18.

The league was created as a way to keep teenagers off the streets during the summer months. A shirt worn by 18-year-old Lowell resident and Peace League player Dennis Cardonneau states, “Shoot hoops, not people.”

As Donkor talks on the sideline about the Peace League, a game against league teams the Celtics and the Thunder comes down to the wire.

“It’s had major impact on my growth as a player and a person, because without this summer league, I could be any-

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The Spurs' Trokon Harris (1), left, and Thunder's Brian Naje (24) and Javien Kirmil (3) play in the Peace League at the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Lowell on July 14.

# League

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where on the streets," Donkor said over the game noise. "I could be doing whatever it is, but I came here and put my work in and showcased my talents."

Donkor now plans to play collegiate basketball at Barry University, a Division II private school in Miami, Fla. When asked how Donkor got involved in the Peace League, he points to a banner overlooking the court that displays the smiling face of local legend William "Billy" Gilmore.

"That man right there," Donkor said.

According to Donkor, Gilmore was the one who first put a basketball in his hands nearly a decade ago.

Gilmore, who passed away unexpectedly in 2018, is the former Boys & Girls Club director. His positive impact on the youth of Lowell has rippled through multiple generations. One of his many contributions was co-founding the Peace League, along with Mike Branch and Eric McCoy.

The Peace League is now run by Elliot Vargas, who is on the court for every league game. The league runs from the first week in July to mid-August, with a regular season followed by a playoff bracket.

Vargas livestreams the game on Instagram, so family and friends can watch from home.

"It's always been popular," Vargas said while keeping a close eye on the Celtics vs. Thunder game unfolding before him. "The Peace League is becoming a big part of our community."

Vargas details the league, while shouting out words of encouragement to players on both teams. According to Vargas, this year 80 youth were allowed to sign up, with 10 participants making up each of the eight league teams. There are league tryouts, then a draft is carried out to determine who plays for which team. The league is free for the youth.

Vargas said the No. 1 draft pick in this year's Peace League was local basketball star George Turkson, a 6-foot-6 Lowell High student. Turkson, at the age of 15, has already



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The Spurs' Chiozie Adigwe makes moves against the Jesiah Garcia of the Thunder.

been scouted by multiple Division I colleges.

According to Vargas, the Peace League sign-up is on a first-come, first-serve basis. The first 80 kids who sign up each make a team. This means there is a spectrum of basketball backgrounds among the youth participants, from less experienced players to budding stars.

Vargas, recalling his time in the league years ago when he was a club kid, points out the different skill levels added even more intrigue to the league.

"For somebody who wasn't in varsity sports, this was my basketball experience that a lot of kids don't get to experience," Vargas said. "A lot of kids won't be able to make their high school team, so the memories you get playing, this is where they're going to get them. That's what it did for me. I was able to play against kids who ended up going to play in college, and I could say 'I got a steal off that kid one time' or 'I shot a three on that kid one time.'"

Vargas says under normal circumstances the gym is packed with a crowd to watch the league games, with three games taking place from 4 to 7

p.m. both Tuesdays and Thursdays. However, due to pandemic regulations, spectators are not allowed in the gym. Despite this fact, the atmosphere for the games is electric.

With the game between the Celtics and Thunder tied at 64 in the final minute, Thunder coach Frank Wafo calls a timeout and gets his team in a huddle to draw up a play. Right off the timeout an inbound pass leads to a quick score, which ends up being the game winner for the Thunder.

"Almost every game comes down to the wire," Vargas said.

Next up on the schedule on July 15 is what turns out to be another competitive game that comes down to the final seconds between the Heat and the Cavaliers.

Vargas stresses the Peace League is open to both boys and girls, but the league does not get many female participants. He hopes this changes in the future. As for this year, only one girl out of 80 youth signed up for the Peace League: 16-year-old Catherine Antwi, of Lowell, who plays for the Heat.

In the first period on Thursday, Antwi sinks a corner three-pointer for her team, nothing but net.



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The Spurs' George Kiu (9), left, and Thunder's Javien Kirmil (3), give Kevin Agyemang a hand during a Peace League game.

Everyone in the gym erupts in cheers as Antwi runs back up the court to play defense.

The Peace League is funded by the Shannon Community Safety Initiative grant, which is awarded by the state Executive Office of Public Safety and Security. The goal of the grant is to assist the Lowell Police Department with implementing a comprehensive anti-gang and youth violence strategy. According to Joe Hungler, the executive director of the local Boys & Girls Club, the Lowell Police Department receives the grant. He then allocates the funding to local organizations, including the Boys & Girls Club to run the Peace League and other teen programs.

Terance Mann, who grew up in Lowell and today plays in the NBA for the Los Angeles Clippers, is probably the most notable

Peace League alumni. Vargas made promotional material for the league, which he posted on Instagram. According to Vargas, Mann even took the time to send a video of himself to use in the promotional material.

"The video is set in the Clippers practice arena," Vargas said. "(Mann) does a windmill dunk, then looks at the camera and says, 'Peace League is back.'"

When Gilmore died in 2018, Mann thanked Gilmore and praised the league on his Twitter account. The Tweet says, "Peace league is where I met half my friends in the city, half my motivation to play this sport, my competitiveness came from pick up runs at the boys and girls club, everyone tryna prove that they can hoop.. RIP Billy! Thank you!"

The future looks bright for the league, which continues to grow in popularity.

Those who played as youth keep coming back, including Miguel Hernandez, who served as the referee for the games on Thursday. Hernandez is eager to point out that before he was a referee in the Peace League, he won a championship as both a youth player and as a coach.

"I love it here," Hernandez said. "I've been coming to the club since I was 7."

Reflecting on his favorite memory, Hernandez shares a story about making the game winning shot in the Peace League championship game when he was a kid. After sinking the shot, he remembers turning to the sideline to see Gilmore jumping up and down and "going crazy."

"It's always a good vibe here," Hernandez said.

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