

Making Virtual School a Slam Dunk: Teen-Run Nonprofit Helps Kids Bridge Digital Divide

Alley-Oop Kids was founded to help kids get the gear they need to play youth sports, but in the midst of a pandemic, it's found a new calling



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By Jonathan Bloom

Kids grow up quickly — and Shay Patel is living proof.

Today, the tall, soft-spoken high school junior has a deep voice and some serious moves on the basketball court that find him soaring over his friends' flailing arms for a slam dunk.

But six years ago, long before he could reach the basket, Shay had already developed a passion for shooting hoops — and for the shoes that go with it.

"They always say, look good, play good, feel good," he said of his ever-growing sneaker collection. It was one afternoon in fifth grade that Shay made a simple observation with profound consequences. "I had a basketball practice at the Boys' and Girls' Club," he said. "I had brand new shoes, the latest gear, and the kids before me, they were playing in flip-flops and using a volleyball as a basketball."

Shay's mom vividly recalls the conversation that followed in the car.

"I could tell that he was upset about it, I could tell that he had empathy for the kids that didn't have the proper basketball gear," Supna Patel recalled. "He was little, he was only 11, but ... he decided that he wanted to do something about it."

In a YouTube video, fifth-grade Shay announced the launch of his new nonprofit called [Alley-Oop](#).

"An alley-oop is an assist," present-day Shay told us. "It's where a point guard will throw it up to the center for a dunk. ... We want them to dunk, as in succeed to the fullest."

And succeed they did. Alley-Oop's first project raised \$6,000 through basketball events and bake sales, and used the money to buy new basketball gear for each of the 60 kids enrolled in the Boys' and Girls' Club program.

"Our motto is, 'Kids helping kids soar,'" said Akshaan Ahuja, Shay's childhood friend and now an Alley-Oop board member. "So the more kids we have, the more kids we can help."

Building off the momentum of their first victory, the kids behind Alley-Oop launched an ambassador program to enlist their fellow middle schoolers as volunteers, and proceeded to hold basketball clinics, a 3-point contest, and more of those bake sales — featuring Alley-Oop's own stylishly-packaged chocolate chip cookies.

"I have personally baked a bunch of cookies, and I have a whole team of people that help me," said Shay's younger brother Rishan, who's now in 8th grade. "I think it's the love that goes into the baking that really makes it enjoyable for people. And the cookies are amazing too."

But as 2020 unfolded like a nightmare in slow motion, a reality began to set in over the summer: the COVID-19 pandemic was not going away, and that meant there would be no return to the classroom or the basketball court in the fall.

"Where we're at right now, all schools are virtual," Shay said. "I was scrambling to figure out, how am I gonna get these Zoom calls going in my bedroom? Am I gonna do them on my bed?"

Though Alley-Oop had kept its sports focus during the spring months — making stay-at-home training videos to help teenage athletes who were stuck at home — Shay and his friends realized their own difficulties adapting to virtual learning could represent a new and urgent need in the community.

"I looked at stuff that I would need, my friends would need, and figured out everyone else was gonna need that same stuff," Shay said. Kids who don't already have a computer or tablet at home "are just gonna keep falling deeper and deeper into a hole. It's unfair, it's a disadvantage. ... We want to give those kids an opportunity to attend class, at least."

By the luck of good timing, Alley-Oop Kids, now a registered 501c3 charity, had already begun to take the first steps toward its next goal. With the \$5,000 they raised in a recent 3-point contest, the teens had hired professional software developers to build a mobile app that could help them expand their reach beyond the Bay Area.

The app provides a free marketplace where donors looking to get rid of extra sports gear can find kids or families who can make use of it. Adding a new category for e-learning devices was a quick fix — and

a game changer.

"As crazy as it sounds, everyone has a device in their drawer, or many people have devices in their drawers, that they no longer use or haven't used in five years," Shay said. "I was cleaning out my room, actually, and I realized, 'I think someone should probably be using this.' That's really where we get inventory."

And throughout an unprecedented fall semester, that inventory has been snapped up nearly as quickly as it rolls in. Though the teens facilitated some of the earliest transactions through in-person meetups, their ultimate goal is for donors and recipients to arrange exchanges amongst themselves through the app's chat feature.

Though online marketplaces can occasionally provide openings for trolls and fraudsters, Shay said the Alley-Oop app's early users seem to be acting just as good neighbors should.

"There's just a lot of good people out there, and the good people have been finding our app," he said. "We hope more can find it."

AlleyOop App is available for iOS and Android [here](#).

Tax-Deductible donations can be made [here](#).



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