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Grassroots Effort

Basketball league with a cause creates social outlet for Jewish young adults.

Metro

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It's a great place to live Jewishly!
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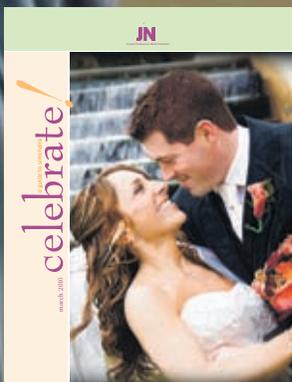


Inside: Celebrate Section



67 years

1942 - 2009
Covering and Connecting Jewish Detroit Every Week



Grassroots Effort

Right: Shawn Achtman, 22, and Rob Antonyan, 26, both of Royal Oak, Andrew Pellegrino, 22, of Walled Lake, Eric Bryant, 25, of Farmington Hills and Russ Young, 23, of Wixom

Below: Justin Jacobs, 27, of Bloomfield Hills organized Come Play Detroit.



Photo by Jerry Zolynsky

Basketball league with a cause creates social outlet for Jewish young adults.



Photo by Spencer Steel

Rachel Lachover

Special to the Jewish News

The atmosphere at the Thursday night basketball games is a combination of passion and intensity; all the men have a great attitude. The competition level is strong and the teams play rough, but knowing that the league was designed to support Friendship Circle adds a sense of community for everyone.

These games at Franklin Athletic Club in Southfield are now an exciting place to be for Metro Detroit's young adults. A newly established weekly basketball league is bringing groups of men together to enjoy brotherhood and camaraderie as well the opportunity to raise funds for West Bloomfield-based Friendship Circle, which helps children with special needs and their families.

Under the leadership of Justin Jacobs,

27, a native Detroiter, Come Play Detroit has formed a basketball league called "Come Play Detroit in partnership with The Friendship Circle." More than 100 young adults — the majority Jewish — have joined to help raise money so far.

After living in Chicago for four years doing party promotions, Jacobs returned to Detroit and lives in Bloomfield Hills. He quickly realized something was significantly lacking in his social life here, something he'd found in other urban areas. Detroit's void of activities for young adults needed to be immediately filled.

"The only place I could find that offered [sports] activities for young Jewish adults was through the B'nai Brith league, but they play Sunday mornings at 9 a.m.," he said. "This doesn't exactly attract the recent college graduates and young professionals that enjoy going out on Saturday nights."

A Joint Endeavor

From Jacobs' desire to fill the social gap came the idea of organizing a new basketball league. Initially, he approached Friendship Circle's LifeTown Director Bassie Shemtov to see if they would be interested in being partners. Going to Friendship Circle for support was an easy decision for Jacobs, knowing the entire community would be enthusiastic about supporting this cause.

"Justin's sister was a volunteer at Friendship Circle," Shemtov said. "He was inspired by her passion for kids with special needs and came up with the creative idea to form this amazing basketball league on a philanthropic foundation.

"Friendship Circle is so honored to be supported by Come Play Detroit. The guys in this league are great role models for our teen volunteers. They are a shining example of how you can practice selfless giving

in nearly every facet of your life — even while shooting hoops!"

With Friendship Circle on board, Jacobs had an easy time finding sponsors to help with the cost of league fees, referees, courts and personalized jerseys. Ten local businesses signed up to sponsor this inaugural season.

"I am a supporter of Friendship Circle," said sponsor Steve Goldberg, Stage Deli owner. "It's the least I could do for them; this is a great cause."

Sponsors support a team named for their business with their company logo on the front of jerseys and the Friendship Circle logo on the back. Sponsorship dues of \$250 are tax-deductible and 60 percent goes to Friendship Circle.

Sponsors are Bricker-Tunis Furs, Fringe Salon, Lakes Urgent Care and the Stage Deli, all in West Bloomfield; Déjà Vu and Glamour Puss Beauty Bar

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Special Report

COME PLAY DETROIT

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Photo by Jerry Zolynsky

Nick Dallas, 29, and Bradley Garden, 22, both of West Bloomfield

& Boutique, both in Franklin; The MGA Group (Michigan Graphics and Awards) in Berkley; Novi Laser and Aesthetic in Novi; Weinstein Jewelers and Loan in Farmington Hills; and Jerusalem Pizza, in both Southfield and West Bloomfield.

Initially, the Jewish Community Center of West Bloomfield was considered as a location for league play, but because of scheduling difficulties it was unable to accommodate. "Between our youth leagues, JCC Maccabi and Frankel Jewish Academy games, our courts are simply packed," said Dave Stone, associate executive director. "We are, however, looking for ways to support the league and heighten awareness for them."

The league plays at Franklin, which has cut court fees because the league supports a good cause. Teams pay \$640 each.

About The League

Ten teams, each with seven to nine players, were organized in a matter of weeks. Now four weeks into the league, the response is tremendous, with a waitlist of men who would like to play and inquiries about the next season. The league is 80 percent Jewish, with the average age ranging between 23-35.

Games are played weekly on Thursday

nights at Franklin, with one at 7 p.m., two at 8 p.m. and another two at 9 p.m. All referees are certified by the Michigan High School Athletic Association.

"The guys are very competitive," said referee Ric Crouse. "They play hard, but have a good time. It's nice to see them playing for a good cause and having fun at the same time."

The season lasts 10 weeks, with eight regular season games followed by a week of playoffs. The season will culminate on April 22 with an All-Star game, a 3-point contest and a championship game.

Looking To The Future

Come Play Detroit is one of the first steps in an initiative called CommunityNEXT (CNEXT), supported by the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit. Its aim is to reach the young adult community.

"We plan to use April 22 as a launch party for Come Play Detroit and CNEXT," Jacobs said. "Sports are only one aspect of the initiative, but other ideas are in the works for social gatherings."

At the launch, Friendship Circle's Shemtov will speak to the players, sponsors and guests.

The league will have three seasons each year. The next one will begin in late May



Photo by Spencer Steel



Photo by Spencer Steel

Above: Brett Powell, 24, of Royal Oak

Above: Jordan Wolfe and Marc Piper, both 27 and of Royal Oak; Justin Jacobs, 27, of Bloomfield Hills; Michael Leach, 26, of Berkley; Blair Gottlieb, 30, of Sylvan Lake; David Herc, 27, of Berkley; Adam Jahnke and Michael Bassirpour, both 27 and of Royal Oak. Jeff Vieder, 26, of Berkley is not pictured. He also is a member of the Glamour Puss team.

or early June, and then again in early fall.

Eventually, Jacobs wants to expand Come Play Detroit to several other sports, for males and females, as well as other co-ed social experiences.

"Our goal through starting this basketball league," he said, "along with other events currently in the planning stages, is to create more opportunities for people in our community to get together and to expand the horizons of the participants by exposing them to athletic, cultural and social experiences."

League member Brett Powell said, "Being a part of a community and meeting other like-minded individuals in an athletic environment is a great way to meet people and develop character."

Rabbi Jason Miller, rabbi at Oakland County-based Tamarack Camps and at Congregation T'chayah in Oak Park, is a player on one of the teams.

"What is so great about the basketball league is the grassroots way in which it was created," he said. "Too often, our organized Jewish community focuses its attention on the young Jews who no longer live in Metro Detroit, trying to entice them back. Justin focused on the young Jews who are currently living here and sought to create something big for us. What will

be telling is whether the institutions are wise enough to see Justin's innovation and invest in it."

Come Play Detroit offers an opportunity to draw people out of their houses and engage with others in their age group in the community — whether it is basketball, another sport or other social activity.

"I don't want this to be a 'show up, play and go home' moment," Jacobs said. "I want it to be a bigger experience. Franklin has opened up its courts to the league, even if you are not a member of the club. This way, players and friends can sit, chill, hang out, watch the other games and enjoy the evening." □

Rachel Lachover is program manager for Southeastern Michigan Jewish Alliance.

For more information on Come Play Detroit, contact Justin Jacobs at comeplaydetroit@gmail.com. You can find "Come Play Detroit Basketball in partnership with The Friendship Circle" on Facebook. A site, www.comeplaydetroit.com, will be launched soon. For more information on Friendship Circle, visit www.friendshipcircle.org.