

# Sport Of Unity

The Be More basketball program offers youths more than skills for the court.

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Staff Reporter

“A black, Jewish and Asian kid were playing a game of hoops ...” It sounds like the beginning to a bad joke, but in the case of Be More, this scenario is unbelievably beautiful.

In fact, 90 African-American, white, Orthodox Jewish, Korean, Latino and Muslim youths have played several rounds of basketball together since May 6, the first Sunday of four weekend sessions to help Baltimore children from various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds discover just how much they have in common.

“These communities have no exposure to each other. They go into each other’s neighborhoods, and a sense of fear is in their eyes,” said

Thibault Manekin, one of Be More’s five founders. “Be More exposes the children, 10-11 years of age, to different cultures. It gives them a comfortable environment for asking the questions they have always wanted to ask but were never given the opportunity to.”

The program was piloted last September after Mr. Manekin and some childhood friends became disconcerted by local tensions and decided to take a step toward unifying their hometown.

They brainstormed and selected sports as the venue for fostering contact between youths. At first, five out of six communities they approached refused to get involved, didn’t want their kids to mix with the others, he said.

But the Be More team was persistent, and they eventually got a small group to commit to their basketball camp of sorts, where the youths are broken into teams, given uniforms and rotate around the gym to five stations. Four of the stations improve their basketball skills, the fifth is a dialogue station where trained coaches help them explore their similarities

and differences while discussing issues that affect them as young people.

The pilot session took place at Park School. The May session was held at Gilman School.

Six of the kids involved with Be More got together for pizza at Eden Café in May, greeting each other with the special Be More handshake, to talk about their experiences.

Tymia Graham, a 10-year-old student at New Song Academy, said she didn’t think she could “hang” with a Muslim boy or girl.

“Since they are not my culture and we don’t believe in the same God, I thought maybe I wouldn’t want to be around them,” she said. “But since Be More, I have met a lot of them, and they’re really cool.”

For Chauncy Wylie, 10, also from New Song Academy, Be More was a rude awakening.

“[Before Be More], all I did was think about myself. But since I met these people, I think about a lot of other stuff, too. ... I now know a lot of things about other cultures. ... I learned not to think bad about people

even if they dress crazy,” he said, catching himself in mid-sentence. “Well, I used to think they dress crazy. Now, I think I was crazy.”

All the students expressed what appears to be a Be More cliché: Different doesn’t mean bad. And they said they now know that even with their differences, they have much in common.

“We all like playing basketball, we all like cheese pizza,” said Sarah Arafat, an 11-year-old from Al Rahmah School, with a laugh. “I learned you can make friends from anywhere as long as they are good people.”

“Sports are a wonderful tool to learn a lot of life lessons. ... The kids become comfortable once they see the basketball,” said Beth Tfiloh graduate and Be More program director Craig Lustman. “A lot of kids had different stereotypes that were embedded in them from their own community, but when they started playing hoops, they forgot about those things, and we helped them build off their similarities.” ■



(Left to right) Be More participants Yaron Trink, 13, Gabriel Koo, 9, and Eric Gardenas, 13, go after a rebound during one of Sunday’s many basketball games at the Gilman Athletic Center.