

Niagara Falls, New York

Population	50,193
Development pattern	High-density small city
Population density	3,956 per square mile
Median household income	\$31,336
Number of kids under age 18	10,387
Partners involved	City of Niagara Falls Niagara Falls Housing Authority Winning Because I Tried Niagara Falls Police Athletic League Summer Basketball Tournament

Like many small cities across the country, the city of Niagara Falls is home to large pockets of lower-income, at-risk communities. Many of these neighborhoods had basketball courts, but time – along with vandalism and other illicit nighttime activities – took its toll.

The city was “spending a lot of money to maintain marginal courts where people didn’t want them anyway, and we were getting complaints from neighbors who lived nearby,” says Thomas DeSantis, the city’s senior planner. “We wanted to use all of that money to create one large-scale park with actual programming. It led to a much more elegant solution that let us do more things than anybody thought we’d get.”

That solution was Legends Basketball Park, a 4.5-acre, inner-city, state-of-the-art basketball park. It boasts indoor courts, outdoor courts with stadium lighting and bleachers, locker rooms, and an auditorium. The city works with local community groups to offer programming for both youth and adults – from finance workshops to exercise classes to health and wellness fairs. Four joint use agreements were essential to making Legends work where other basketball courts had failed.

City councilman Charles Walker was a central figure in forging the partnerships that created Legends. One-fifth of Niagara Falls’ population is 18 years old or younger, and he dreamed of offering kids a safe place to play basketball that would overcome the stigma of courts leading to trouble. “The idea was not just to do a park, but to get the community to start programming there for kids and adults”

Councilman Walker created a committee to brainstorm ways to make safe courts a reality. As committee members – city staff, business leaders, and residents – talked about their goals, they realized the answer was a new court that engaged the entire community. Working with the city, the committee first established a joint use agreement with the school board to use the field at Harry Abate School as a city park.

The city invested \$280,000 in Legends, and acquired an additional \$35,000 in donations from local businesses and individuals, including a state senator. Another \$30,000 came from tax revenue from a nearby casino.



The councilman's committee then integrated a mentorship program. The 2011 Community Intervention Initiative was a 12-week program developed by local basketball star Modie Cox, who runs a national program called Winning Because I Tried (whose motto is "no workshop, no jump shot"). Kids arrived after school, met with five volunteer mentors, heard a guest speaker – topics ranged from health, personal finance, conflict resolution, and other essential life skills – and then got to play in three games that evening. "Niagara Falls is a poverty-stricken community," Cox says. "It's very easy to get yourself in trouble because there aren't a lot of opportunities."

To even Cox's surprise, the mentoring was a hit. Sixty kids signed up, and 45 completed the program – a relatively high retention rate. Cox describes one young man who mouthed off at his teammates. After talking with Cox, he decided not to stalk off and drop out, instead agreeing to apologize to the entire group and sit out that night's game. He became a model participant and finished the program.

In June 2012, the city will induct its first local athlete into the Legends Hall of Fame. "So kids will see people – maybe even their own grandfather – honored for their athletic ability and support to the community," Walker says, "and hopefully it will help them stay focused and want to make it up there themselves."

More than 60 public and private organizations, including the city school district, police department, and the housing authority, are regularly involved in Legends programming. During basketball games and tournaments, public concerts, and wellness fairs, representatives from these groups provide health care, education, and employment opportunity information.

Niagara Falls has often used informal (or "handshake") agreements to expedite new programming. But Legends Basketball Park required some of the city's first formalized joint use agreements.

The first was between the city and the Niagara Falls Housing Authority. The Housing Authority provides an indoor gymnasium facility. The city pays the Authority to use the facility and provides insurance, and the Authority is indemnified.

The second agreement was between Winning Because I Tried Enterprises and the city. The group provides mentoring services, during which the city is covered by the group's insurance in the event of injury.

The city and the Police Athletic League created the third partnership. The league holds its annual Beat the Streets Basketball Tournament at the court, and it provides a certificate of insurance that indemnifies the city.

Finally, the city and two individuals who operate the Summer Basketball Tournament established a fourth agreement. The Summer Basketball

Tournament provides a certificate of insurance, and the city pays the organizers to help hold the tournament.

The joint use agreements help build community engagement, Walker says, and have generated an active volunteer presence at the courts. “These adults are talking to the kids about having ownership over the park, so they end up wanting to take care of it.” During the first year, Walker says, there was virtually no crime reported at the park.

Legends has been such a success that Niagara Falls is investing in additional infrastructure: a path for rollerblading, soccer nets, and exercise equipment around the walking track. Walker says they will likely add intervention programs from other community groups.

Niagara Falls provides an excellent example for communities who encounter public resistance around play spaces. City leaders demonstrated their willingness to tackle difficult issues head-on by developing a youth intervention program and offering broad-based programming targeted to neighbor’s needs. The result is a vibrant park that offers inner-city youths and their families a safe, state-of-the-art opportunity for play.