

Equipping more kids for on-the-field success

By Meghan Dunn, CNN

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Silver Spring, Maryland (CNN) Like many children, Max Levitt grew up loving sports.

"I was wearing jerseys all the time, watching sports on TV," he said. "It was what I spent every second of my free time doing."



CNN Hero Max Levitt

In college, Levitt promptly chose Sports Management as his major. He started his first internship as the equipment manager for the college football team.

Content by Kenneth Cole

South Side Legacy

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"I'll never forget walking into the equipment room," Levitt said. "Shelves full of the nicest cleats, shoulders pads, training gear ... it was all top of the line."

Then, right before the start of the season, Levitt was told to throw out all the equipment. The team needed to make space for the brand-new equipment arriving the following week.

"Some of this gear was barely used," Levitt said. "I was throwing away footballs that the running back held a few times in practice."

Levitt knew there must be a better use for it. He started thinking about the equipment that was being wasted all over the country -- not just at the college level, but among secondary schools and families.

"I had a very fortunate upbringing; I could play any sport I wanted and just go to Sports Authority and get whatever I needed," Levitt said. "But when I got to college, I met kids who didn't have the opportunities I had. I thought they really could have used equipment like this when they were kids."

In 2011, Levitt decided to make his college dream a reality. He started Leveling the Playing Field, a nonprofit that he describes as a "food bank for sports equipment." In 2013, he quit his job to run the organization full time.

Today, the group has a 4,000-square-foot warehouse in Silver Spring, Maryland, with more than \$1 million worth of athletic equipment. The majority of equipment donations come from local school teams and individuals.

The organization donates to low-income schools and nonprofits that apply for equipment. Once a school or team is approved, they can receive free equipment in perpetuity.

"Every kid should have the opportunity to play on a team," Levitt said. "You learn work ethic, structure, sportsmanship, perseverance. You learn so much that will shape the person you become."

CNN's Meghan Dunn spoke with Levitt about his work. Below is an edited version of their conversation.

CNN: Why is access to sports opportunities a challenge for some kids?

Max Levitt: There are so many barriers in the way of a low-income kid trying to play a sport. The registration fees to join a team are incredibly high, not to mention how much money you have to spend at a sporting goods store just to come home with enough stuff to play. We're talking about \$250 to \$500 for equipment that the kid is going to outgrow rather quickly. That sometimes is the equivalent of multiple months of paying your heating bill or a week's worth of dinner for your kids. And for families that struggle to even do that, to think about investing in baseball equipment that is going to be no good within a year or two, it's not a decision. They cannot let their kid play baseball.

CNN: Who do you donate to and what is the process to get equipment?

Levitt: We're donating it to Title 1 schools, charter schools, after-school youth programs, like a Boys and Girls Club or a YMCA. It could be a church or a neighborhood after-school care program. Really any organization that is trying to engage low-income kids in athletics, we want to be there as a resource to them.

One of the core values of what we do is just making it very simple and easy to work with us. We just want them to be able to get the equipment. They come in here, and within an hour, they leave with everything they need to start that program. A battle they've been fighting for 10 years is solved in such a simple way. Some people are flabbergasted by that.

CNN: What does the future look like for Leveling the Playing Field?

Levitt: When we started in my parents' basement, I remember just envisioning a warehouse with racks full of sporting equipment. There's a lot of stuff that I envisioned and it's incredibly satisfying to see them come to reality.

Now, I'm envisioning more warehouses like this. Hopefully, in a couple years from now we'll have a couple locations. I don't even think we've really scratched the surface in terms of the amount of equipment we can collect.

Want to get involved?

Check out <http://www.levelingtheplayingfield.org/> and see how to help.