

NBA Cares

An Interview with David Stern, Commissioner, National Basketball Association (NBA), New York

EDITORS' NOTE David Stern graduated from Rutgers University with a B.A. in political science and history, and then studied law at Columbia Law School. He proceeded to work at the New York law firm Proskauer Rose, where he served as outside counsel to the NBA. He left the firm in 1978 to join the NBA as General Counsel, and was named the league's Executive Vice President in 1980. Stern was unanimously elected to his current position in February 1984.



David Stern

ORGANIZATION BRIEF The National Basketball Association (NBA) is the world's premier men's professional basketball league and one of the major professional sports leagues in North America. Founded in New York in June 1946 as the Basketball Association of America, the league adopted the name National Basketball Association in the fall of 1949 after merging with the rival National Basketball League. With its games televised around the globe in 43 languages, the NBA (www.nba.com) also runs the Women's National Basketball Association and the NBA Development League.

The NBA has been active in the community for many years. What made you decide it was time to bring all of the league's community and social responsibility activities under the NBA Cares umbrella in 2005?

We wanted people who interacted with us to better understand the scope and intensity of our commitment. And we thought that if we gave it a name and an identity, as a program, we could accomplish that. The primary reason it's important to advertise what we're doing is that it exposes us to all of the various worthy causes out there, as well as encourages other organizations to behave in socially responsible ways. So we have backed NBA Cares with an extraordinary campaign highlighting the activities of our players, and a TV campaign during our games. Fortunately, this came at a time when our players' reputations were flagging undeservedly. So it had the dual impact of promoting social responsibility as well as improving the reputation of our players. Today, there's a much better appreciation of what the players are doing, and it's only going to get better.

With so many areas of need, how does

NBA Cares decide where to allocate its resources?

Historically, the NBA has focused on education and reading. One year, we organized a very successful volunteerism series during a time when that was a national priority. And we've honed in on at-risk youth through drop-out prevention and conflict avoidance. Kids are the group that we have traditionally had the greatest impact on, and unfortunately, you don't have to look too far to find kids at risk. But there was also a tremendous outpouring of

aid by our players after Hurricane Katrina.

In what ways does the NBA partner with nonprofits to add greater expertise to its social responsibility agenda?

We have a series of partnerships with the United Nations. We have a strong partnership with Habitat for Humanity and KaBOOM! And although the United States is one of the few countries that doesn't have a sports ministry, we partner in some substantial ways with the State Department, in terms of our travels abroad – they ease our burden with respect to shipments and access to embassies. And we have like-minded marketing partners like Adidas, Nike, Sprite, and South African Airways. We partner across the spectrum with those who can execute, support, and assist us in our mission.

How does the NBA introduce the NBA Cares ethos to new players coming into the league?

We view it as our obligation to educate players as to the impact they can have; but we also teach players to follow their hearts, based on their background, their community, and their interests. Every player wants to give back for a different reason. Some have medical histories in their families and elect to work for a particular cause related to medical research. Some were helped by the Boys or Girls Club. And some have come out of neighborhoods wrecked by AIDS, violence, and under-funded education, and they want to change that. So many players show up already eager to participate in these types of activities. But we start community outreach programs during rookie orientation anyway. We take rookies to schools and hospitals, so they can begin to see the impact they can have on people. Today, many players come to us and ask us to support different causes, including the player from Nigeria who wanted to



know whether we would support a clinic in his hometown – and, of course, we did. That always brings a smile to my face.

You've recruited some top talent to help guide the programs of NBA Cares, including Kathy Behrens and Bob Lanier, who are working with you on community outreach. How important has it been to the success of NBA Cares to assemble this team?

The most important aspect of working on initiatives like this is making sure everything gets done, and you need to have top quality people to get it done. But the second most important thing is explaining these activities throughout the organization, and showing the entire community that this is not something we just pay lip service to. We want everyone to realize that we're committed to this, and to providing the resources necessary to make it happen. It's a one-two punch that's very important to us, and our team is very good at it.

Others have commented that community service and social responsibility are very close to your heart. To what would you attribute your enthusiasm for the programs of NBA Cares?

Without making it sound terribly corny, I've always believed that if you're lucky enough to have something, it's your responsibility to give back. It's that simple. And everyone should do it in their own way. I do it. I consider nonprofit board service to be one way. And I consider giving your time and your material resources to support good causes to be a part of being a good human being. I also think success obligates you to be socially responsible. We are at a phase now, in our country and throughout the world, in which people are beginning to realize that the public sector can't meet all of the world's needs. When it comes to natural disaster relief, education, and health care, the list is endless. It makes more sense for private enterprise to allocate its expertise to addressing these issues. The private sector is better at it. And from what I've seen, this philosophy is paying off. ●

David Stern volunteers with Habitat for Humanity.