

Caring About Community

**An Interview with Kathleen Behrens,
Senior Vice President, Community and Player Programs,
National Basketball Association, New York**



Kathleen Behrens at a Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS conference

EDITORS' NOTE *Kathleen Behrens began her career in politics, serving in the administration of former New York Governor Mario Cuomo. In 1995, she joined New York Cares where, for six years, she served as Executive Director. In 2001, Behrens joined the NBA as Vice President, Community Relations, overseeing all of the NBA's global philanthropic and public service initiatives. She was appointed to her current position in April 2005.*

COMPANY BRIEF *Founded in 1946, the National Basketball Association (www.nba.com) is the world's premier basketball*

league. Headquartered in New York City, the NBA has 30 teams divided into the Eastern and Western conferences.

What are the primary philanthropic areas of focus for NBA Cares?

We focus on three areas: education, with a real emphasis on literacy; youth and family development; and health-related causes. When we launched the NBA Cares program almost two years ago, we said we would raise and donate \$100 million to charity, provide one million hours of hands-on service to communities around the world, and build 100 places where kids and families could live, learn, and play. We surpassed our expectations on the last one in the first year. So we're now committed to building 250 places where kids and families can live, learn, and play. And we're making great progress on the first two as well.

Have there been any areas that have needed improvement?

Increasingly, we've tried to involve not only our players, but our employees as well. And now, our employee volunteer program is stronger than it has ever been. In addition, this year, for the first time, we became involved in a big service project. We had our annual sales and marketing meetings in New Orleans, and a couple hundred league and team employees worked on a project with Habitat for Humanity, and a project with KaBOOM!, which builds playgrounds.

How important are partnerships in this work?

We try to find organizations that are doing good work, and which meet our high standards. But we would not be able to do what we do without our partnerships. We're going to be traveling this summer with Basketball Without Borders, and we've already been in touch with a lot of the NGOs in local communities, to research which ones we want to support.

How important has solid leadership been to the success of these programs?

David [Stern] is the perfect CEO for this kind of work. He really believes in it, and so it's never too difficult to get his attention. I've worked with a lot of companies in my career and David cares about social responsibility as much, if not more, than anybody I've ever seen.

Do you think NBA players receive too much unfair criticism?

People tend to focus more on the negative things players occasionally do than all of the incredibly good things players are doing every day. But I feel that it's largely our responsibility to help get the good messages out, and help the public understand that, overall, the NBA is an organization that cares very much about our communities. ●

Fostering Player Involvement

**An Interview with Bob Lanier,
Special Assistant to the NBA Commissioner, New York**



Bob Lanier speaks to a group of campers at the Junior NBA/WNBA Summer Camp

EDITORS' NOTE *Robert Jerry Lanier, Jr. played for the NBA from 1970 to 1984, first with Detroit, then Milwaukee. An eight-time All Star who wears legendary size 22 shoes, Lanier has been a coach, businessman, and philanthropist, and has worked in the commissioner's office since 1995, focusing on social responsibility.*

How long have you been involved with community service through the NBA?

I've been involved since the late '80s with our Stay in School initiative, which like all of the NBA's social responsibility projects, is now under the auspices of NBA Cares. That's where my entire focus is now, on a global level.

Is it difficult to get players involved?

Not at all. I just try to put them in situations where they can shine. I love to see kids sitting on their laps with books, and hanging out with them in gymnasiums, and just having one-on-one sessions with the players talking about life issues. And we've had a lot of participation among our "Legend" players as well, both from the WNBA and NBA. That has been a great way for the older players to mentor the younger players, and show them how it's done.

What are your other strategies for encouraging participation?

Almost daily, before players go out on the court, we talk to them about leadership skills, and about things like HIV and AIDS awareness, character development, and education – all the things that they need to understand to be effective ambassadors in the community. What does it take to be a good leader? What are some of the main issues in your country of origin, and where can you try to make a difference? And we encourage them to talk in a community arena, which helps get all the ideas out on the table. I really applaud all the guys who go back to their native countries and build hospitals and dormitories, and all the giving back that each of them does. That's what we're working towards. We want them to see the problems that exist and give back.

How has this work affected you personally?

When I first came into the league, I underestimated the impact I had on young people who were looking up to me. And it's fascinating, because now that we're doing all of this on a global basis with NBA Cares and Basketball Without Borders, and now that we have this huge influx of international players, we can get players in a position to not only encourage reading among kids, but also to talk about social issues, social responsibility, and community-wide engagement as well.

How has the NBA leadership had an impact on what you are able to accomplish?

David [Stern] has always been very focused on education, and he initially brought me in to work with Stay in School. And I can't say enough about Kathy Behrens, who comes from New York Cares. She has really taken this community effort to another level in the last five or six years, and has gotten so many more people focused and involved. ●