

# Fully Engaged as Good Corporate Citizens

An Interview with Kathy Behrens,  
Executive Vice President-Social Responsibility & Player Programs, National Basketball Association

**EDITORS' NOTE** *Kathy Behrens joined the NBA in September 2000 as Vice President, Community Relations. She later worked as Senior Vice President of Community & Player Programs. Prior to joining the NBA, Behrens served as Executive Director of New York Cares. Before joining New York Cares in 1995, Behrens served in the administration of former New York Governor Mario M. Cuomo, and was the Executive Director of the Friends of Cuomo Campaign Committee during the 1994 governor's race. Behrens serves on the Board of Directors for New York Cares and the Ad Council. She is also a trustee of the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame. Behrens graduated from the University of Hartford.*



Kathy Behrens

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** *The NBA is a global sports and media business built around three professional sports leagues: the National Basketball Association, the Women's National Basketball Association, and the NBA Development League. The league has established a major international presence with offices in 13 markets worldwide, games and programming in 215 countries and territories in 47 languages, and NBA merchandise for sale in more than 125,000 stores in 100 countries on six continents. NBA rosters at the start of the 2013-14 season featured a record 92 international players from 39 countries and territories. NBA Digital's assets include NBA TV, which is available in 60 million U.S. homes, and NBA.com, which recorded 26.9 billion page views during the 2013-14 season, with more than half of all visitors originating from outside of North America. The NBA is the number-one professional sports league on social media, with more than 675 million likes and followers globally across all league, team, and player platforms. Through NBA Cares, the league and its teams and players have donated more than \$237 million to charity, completed more than three million hours of hands-on community service, and created more than 895 places where kids and families can live, learn, or play.*

**How do you define your role with the NBA?**

We believe that we have a responsibility to be fully engaged in our communities, and not just where our teams play. New York is special for us, since it is home to our league's headquarters, so we offer a tremendous number of programs

for our employees to give back, and we work very closely with the Knicks and Nets to support their outreach efforts. Part of our culture, not just as a league in terms of our players and our teams but also for our employees, is very much focused on how we can be fully committed to being really good corporate citizens. We know it's good for our employees, we know it's good for the city, and we know it's good for the organizations and the people with whom we work. It's my job to help facilitate that engagement.

**What impact will the 2015 NBA All-Star game coming to New York have on the city?**

The All-Star game was my first exposure to the corporate side of the NBA. In 1998, the last time the All-Star game was in New York, I was running a nonprofit organization called New York Cares and had the opportunity to work closely with the league on some of its community outreach. I saw how much goes into it and how exciting it is for the host city.

The difference in 2015 is that New York now has two teams, two terrific buildings, and two great organizations that already do so much within their communities. We have been meeting regularly with the Knicks, the Nets, and the Mayor's office to make sure our events are not just about Brooklyn and Manhattan but that it is a five-borough community-focused event. We want to reach kids all around the city and bring fun fitness-related basketball activities to schools, parks, and playgrounds, and leave behind a lasting impact after the event concludes.

We know the great experience people have with our All-Star activities, and we know that the events and clinics they attend are all great, but we want to make sure there are things that are transformative, so we'll work to fix up playgrounds and create new basketball courts in schools throughout the city.

In the end, we know that we'll reach hundreds of thousands of kids throughout the season in schools, playgrounds, and parks while celebrating the great game of basketball throughout the city.

**Has the philanthropic component always been ingrained in All-Star?**

For every big NBA event, David (Stern, Commissioner Emeritus) and Adam (Silver, Commissioner) have always been committed to making sure we highlight not just the players and

the teams, and great basketball, but our commitment to giving back.

As our business and impact have grown, we have made sure we're following through on our goal that everyone in what we call the "NBA Family" is fully engaged in community events and activities.

When you think about coming to All-Star, all of our guests know that, in addition to the great basketball and fun events they will attend, they will all have an opportunity to participate in a service project as part of our NBA Cares All-Star Day of Service, so they can roll up their sleeves and give back in a meaningful way. Everyone tells us that it has always been the highlight of All-Star weekend, and that's saying something because there are so many tremendous activities for both kids and adults.

**Are you surprised to see how engaged the players have become in giving back?**

No. It's so ingrained in who we are as a business. We have a rookie transition program and even those younger players, who haven't even played in the NBA yet, absolutely get it. They understand that giving back is part of their obligation once they enter the NBA.

This is not because we preach it to them; they see it for themselves. They have relationships with older players who talk passionately about it and demonstrate how committed they are through their actions. The outreach and connection that our players have with their communities, be it the ones they lived in growing up, where they went to college, or where they are from overseas, is real and genuine.

All of our international players come here with the desire to give back to their home countries and we work with them to turn that desire into reality. I give the players all of the credit because they are the ones that make all of these meaningful moments, programs, and partnerships happen.

**How critical is the transition for a retiring player and how do you prepare them for it?**

We work closely with the Players Association to make sure that every NBA player is supported at every step in his journey. This involves not just his transition into the league, but various transitions that players may go through while they're in the NBA – signing another contract, getting traded, handling an injury, or dealing with personal problems. The league, the team, and the Players Association work together to make sure the players know that they have all the support they need and every possible resource is available to them.

We also work to help them become better ambassadors for the business, and we encourage them to start thinking about how their experience playing in the NBA can translate into skills that will help them as they make their transition to a successful career after basketball. They're going to be an ex-NBA player longer than they will be a current NBA player, so we want them to start thinking about it as early as possible.

We offer a variety of programs in which players can participate and have a lot of great resources that are available to them. Current players can work with former players who serve as great role models and we have career coaches that they can work with. We also recently launched a new program with the Player's Association about career transitions and helping guys make that step into life after the NBA.

We always say, "Just ask for help because we're right here." The worst thing one can do is to not take advantage of the available programs and resources.

**How important is the relationship with NBA alumni?**

I really think the NBA does a terrific job of keeping our former players connected to our game. We work with literally hundreds of former players throughout the year on various events including

community appearances and business appearances. There are so many legends traveling the world for us to help celebrate, promote, grow, and teach the game.

Our former players feel connected to the NBA in real ways and All-Star is a great celebration of that. Our Legends Brunch is a highlight of the weekend for many people because, in one room, there are so many of basketball's royalty. Every year, it probably draws the biggest crowd because people are rubbing elbows with all the greats of the game.

Our players and fans respect the history and tradition of our game, and that will be especially true at All-Star in New York City, where so many greats played.

**Are there specific charities you align with?**

There will be specific charities, like the Children's Aid Society, New York Cares, City Harvest, and the Police Athletic League, but our real focus will be partnering with the New York City public schools. We're also going to work with a number of community-based organizations with which the Knicks and Nets have great relationships, but our city-wide focus will be on getting out to the schools, and to the various city parks and recreation facilities. These venues are where so many people are playing the game and that is where we think we can have the most impact.

**What is the focus for NBA Cares?**

NBA Cares is the umbrella for everything we do around the world that fulfills our mission to be leaders in social responsibility. We feel it speaks to our objective, which is that everywhere we are, we make sure that we're giving something back. When we hold our Global Games, All-Star, or The Finals, no matter where they're held, we want to make sure that we're giving people great entertainment and great basketball with the greatest athletes in the world, while also demonstrating that giving back is part of our business culture.

while also making sure that we're giving back. When people think about the NBA, we want them to also think about NBA Cares.

**Does negative press about players sometimes get frustrating when you know how much good is being done?**

No. We do what we do because it's the right thing to do – not because it will generate positive publicity.

People have come to recognize our players for the great athletes they are and for how passionately they play the game, but also for the good they do in their communities. That story is put out more often than stories about the one or two guys who might do something foolish. That used to tarnish the league but it no longer does.

The majority of our guys are doing great things and they're rightfully getting credit for it.

**What has made things work so seamlessly with your new Commissioner, Adam Silver, coming in?**

When Adam came in, everyone already knew and respected him, and enjoyed working with him. Nobody has ever been more prepared to step into a job like this than Adam. We also have a great group of colleagues who are committed

to what we're trying to be, but Adam has done a tremendous job in the short time he has been Commissioner.

**Should more be done to create further opportunities for women?**

I think it is fair to say that we feel good about the way we have been graded for gender and racial hiring. We represent an incredibly multicultural and diverse league where respect and diversity are hallmarks of our history and they always will be. Creating opportunities for women is a big part of that.

I do think that for women in the league and in sports in general, there are an increasing number of opportunities at every level, both on and off the court.

**Has your job been what you expected?**

I've been here 14 years, and every day is fun and challenging. I love what I do, and that I get to work with and partner with so many great people and organizations.

**Do you ever reflect on the successes or are you always looking ahead?**

We look ahead a lot because there is always something else to do, but I think the people who work at the NBA appreciate the opportunity we have and they feel good about working here. They also feel good about where we're going because our future is pretty bright. ●



*Kathy Behrens with young children at an NBA Cares event*

**Do you put metrics around these kinds of efforts?**

When we first started NBA Cares, the metrics focused on three things that we believe in strongly. First, the importance of philanthropy, so we want to make sure that great nonprofit organizations get the support they need to do their work. We believe in the importance of rolling up our sleeves and providing hands-on service to our communities; and we believe in the importance of leaving something behind through legacy projects.

We always work to create places where kids and families can live, learn, or play. We work with Rebuilding Together to help seniors and veterans improve their homes. We work with the Boys and Girls Clubs and other organizations to create places where kids can learn, and playgrounds with basketball courts where they can play. Our metrics focus on how well we are doing that. The results speak for themselves. We've donated hundreds of millions of dollars to charitable organizations, provided three million hours of hands-on service, and we've created close to a thousand places in 25 different countries around the world where kids and families can live, learn, or play.

**With the globalization of basketball, have your international efforts expanded?**

Yes, we do events all over the world. Our teams and players travel and teach the game,