



New York Jets partnering with four organizations as next step in social justice initiative

By: Judy Battista, Dec 22, 2020

When Jazmin Severino got pregnant just before she was to graduate from high school, she had few options. Her morning sickness was so bad that she dropped out. She had no diploma and no job prospects that would pay her enough to support her child in New York City. She was living with her mom in what she remembers as a dangerous neighborhood.

Before she got pregnant, Severino had planned to go to school and develop a career. But after taking time off for the birth of her son, and a brief move to live near his father in North Carolina, Severino was thinking about joining the military, like her son's father. She had even talked to her mother about having her care for the toddler for a few months while she went away to basic training.

Just before she made her final decision, Severino, then 21 years old, was talking to one of her best friends, who told her she should look into a program called Year Up. He had been part of the first class of the non-profit, which provides skills training and internships to young adults to try to close the opportunity divide.

Now, 10 years after she applied and was selected for Year Up, Severino, who said she was always good at fixing things, is an IT support specialist for the New York Jets and the first person in her family to own a home. And Year Up is one of the four organizations chosen by the Jets' Social Justice, Diversity and Inclusion Team for financial support and volunteer work, in the hope that the Jets can help others find the path Severino — who is also a member of the committee — did.

"It completely changed my life," Severino said in a recent interview. "They open your eyes to a whole new world."

The Jets' initiative, which is expected to be announced this week, was six months in the making, a purposefully deliberate approach that allowed the franchise to select programs that can make the kind of incremental impact that boosted Severino. The team is immediately donating \$250,000 to each of four organizations: Year Up; the New York Urban League, which focuses on the issues that lead to inequality; the Innocence Project, whose mission is criminal justice reform and freeing those incarcerated for crimes they did not commit; and the [All Stars Project's Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids](#), which uses improv and conversation to improve relations between teenagers and local police officers.

A small group of Jets officials, including chairman Christopher Johnson and president Hymie Elhai, began to talk in June about what the team could do in the wake of nationwide protests that followed a series of police-involved killings. Johnson has been supportive of players' social justice protests, linking arms with players and coaches during protests in the 2017 season and vowing to pay any fines incurred by his players after the NFL passed a rule in 2018 requiring players who chose to be on the field to stand for the national anthem, a rule that the NFL has never enforced.

But the Jets wanted the work of their new group to be more than a philosophical statement and donation made while the spotlight was focused on the difficult issues they would address. They wanted to find programs and commit resources and, in some cases, manpower that could get into the nitty-gritty of making change.

First, though, Johnson wanted to listen. Johnson is quiet and reserved, and he is also aware that his background — his family fortune stems from the pharmaceutical and consumer goods giant Johnson & Johnson — means he did not grow up with the same experiences many Jets players and employees had. The decision was made that the Social Justice, Diversity and Inclusion Team would include representatives from all areas of the organization, from sales to player personnel. Each member will serve a one-year term, to keep ideas and enthusiasm fresh.

"In recent years, we have all become more aware of the challenges some members of our community face," Johnson wrote in an email. "Having an opportunity to sit and speak with a number of players and staff, I understand that we can all do more to impact the access, equity, participation and rights of these individuals. Following these meaningful conversations, we have sought out to establish strong relationships with organizations that are doing great work in this area. I am extremely proud of our players and staff who are using our platform to effect change. I couldn't be happier to stand beside them as we do this together. We are excited to begin our partnership with these incredible people and look forward to positively impacting the lives of our neighbors."

The group first met in August and started from scratch, talking about all that had



New York Jets owner Christopher Johnson stands with the team during the national anthem before an NFL football game against the Miami Dolphins, Sunday, Nov. 29, 2020, in East Rutherford, N.J. (AP Photo/Adam Hunger)

happened in the preceding months. Then they asked: "Where do we go?" They identified areas they wanted to work in — poverty, race equality and diversity, criminal justice reform, policy-community relations and access to education — and then started to explore organizations. Severino, who was part of the breakout group that focused on education, employment and healthcare, told her story, which her colleagues had never heard before, about the group that taught her how to dress and act in a corporate environment, how to build a resume and go through a job interview, the group that refined her IT skills, then placed her in corporate internships that ultimately led to a job in IT support at MetLife Stadium, where she worked before she was hired by the Jets. Severino had never imagined living outside of Washington Heights before that, and when she got the job at MetLife Stadium, she had to learn how to drive, too. Last week, she was digging out of her first snowstorm as a New Jersey homeowner.

Her son, Christian Nieves, is 13 now, and Severino said she joined the Jets group after the deaths of George Floyd and other African-Americans affected her.

"I came from a bad neighborhood where interactions with the police were not the greatest," Severino said. "I knew I wanted to make a difference. My son was crying — 'Why does this happen?' he said. It feels like my hands are tied. I wanted to do something."

So did Jets defensive lineman Foley Fatukasi, who grew up in Far Rockaway, N.Y. Fatukasi said his high school was diverse, and he did not see racism or injustice directly at school. But as he and his friends got older, they noticed subtle issues in their communities. The group's meetings and the members' interactions with the four organizations selected have already provided a bit of an education for him. The small scale of some of the groups appeals to Fatukasi, who said his goal in joining the Jets' initiative is, along with teammates, to foster face-to-face conversations that will bridge the gaps in understanding about the experience of African-Americans.

"I do feel like some people don't necessarily understand, and some people are scared to have that conversation," he said. "How do we help foster those conversations, where no one feels attacked, that leads to understanding? How do we get people to understand the common ground?"

The Jets' support has come at a critical time for the organizations. Many non-profits have struggled this year, as donations have dried up during the COVID-19 pandemic. And the Jets' announcement comes as so much of the momentum and attention focused on social justice issues nationally has dissipated. For the **All Stars Project**, which has worked with local police departments like the one in Newark, N.J., for a number of years and has brought together thousands of officers and teenagers, the Jets' involvement represents hope for further outreach. The program brings local teenagers and local police officers — in full uniform — into a room together for a series of improv exercises. It is silly and awkward, but that helps level the playing field, said **Shadae McDaniel, the city leader of the All Stars Project of New Jersey**, and reduce the tension that already exists, particularly for the teenagers. Then, the conversations begin.

"The kids get questions — what's your biggest fear at the end of the day?" **McDaniel said.** "A young person will say, 'We don't make it home tonight.' When you ask police officers the same questions and they have the same answer, there is a moment, like, 'Oh my God, I had no idea we had the same fears.' We start opening up conversations of empathy, and also humanizing who they are. In 90 minutes, it starts off with all the friction, and at the end, the cops are giving kids their personal cell phone numbers, saying, 'Call me if you ever have a problem.' Our hope is that the kid and the officer interact, and then when the officer sees kids in the neighborhood, he thinks twice about how to interact with them."

McDaniel called it a holiday gift when she heard from the Jets that the All Stars Project would be receiving their support. She thinks the Jets' involvement will help raise awareness of the program and will break down barriers with police departments and teenagers they hope to reach. The money, she said, should help the group innovate further, to reach more people in new communities who have not yet been reached. She envisions members of the Jets organization even participating in the role-playing and more.

"Who knows, one day we might be able to have a public demonstration at MetLife, with the Jets, of what it looks like with young people and cops performing in different ways together," **McDaniel said.** "We've done these at the Apollo Theater and we can reach 10,000 people that way. Imagine what you can do."