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

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?”

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 that could 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.

McDaniel described it as next step in social justice initiative.

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.

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.

“By now, 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 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.”

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Her son, Christian Nieves, is 12 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.”

“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.”

By: Judy Battista, Dec 22, 2020