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Soccer Without Borders aims for global change

By **Ann Killion** | October 8, 2015 | Updated: October 8, 2015 9:24pm

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Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle

Dennis Escalante, 17 years old, captain on his soccer team with Soccer Without Borders has practice at Mosswood park after school in Oakland, Calif., on Thursday, October 8, 2015.

The 16-year old stood and addressed a group of adults in a language that was not his first, nor his second, but another that he learned in the 18 months since arriving from Afghanistan.

“In my country, it is not safe to live there,” Aseel Mohammad said. “You did not know if you would be alive. The Taliban is crazy.”

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flash point, an issue that generates pushback and stridency. But the reality is, immigrants are here and more are coming. At a gathering in San Francisco this week, in a shared office space under the Bay Bridge, a local group talked about its work to aid children who are not a political football but a human fact.

“We lose sight of the human stories,” Ben Gucciardi said.

Gucciardi, a San Francisco native, is the founder of Soccer Without Borders. The organization uses soccer — a sport played around the world — as a vehicle for change and assimilation. For nine years, since it was founded in Oakland in 2006, the group has worked to use soccer to build a more inclusive society.

“In times of transition, the priorities are meeting basic needs, and that primarily falls on the adults,” said Mary McVeigh, the executive director based in the organization’s Boston office. “But kids don’t have control during that time.”

But often children are the front line of assimilation, enrolling in schools and interacting with the community. Soccer Without Borders’ goal is to make that process easier by using soccer as an entry point.

“Soccer can build a community and, if designed intentionally, can be a place where the healing process can begin,” McVeigh said.

For Aseel, and his teammate Dennis Escalante — whose stories brought many in the meeting



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Luke Walton has learned from the best

to tears — the healing has been profound. The teenagers represent two of the most challenging groups of newcomers. Aseel is a war refugee. Dennis, 17, came as an unaccompanied minor from El Salvador three years ago.



Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle

Dennis Escalante (left), 17 years old, and Aseel Mohammad (right), 16 years old, captains on their soccer team, attend a Soccer Without Borders meeting in San Francisco, Calif., on Wednesday, October 7, 2015. Soccer Without Borders, an east bay non profit hosts a roundtable discussion on how soccer can be a tool to help with the current refugee crisis.

Football friends

“Mr. Ben said ‘Come to practice,’” Dennis said. “I said no, they will laugh at me. I don’t speak English. But that is how I meet all my friends.”

Dennis fled El Salvador when he was 14 with his older sister to escape rampant gangs in his community.

“They try to kill you,” he said. “I had to move away.”

He pointed to Aseel, his co-captain on their soccer team.

“He is my best friend, like a brother,” Dennis said.

When Aseel arrived he was also afraid and awkward.

“I don’t know how to tell to pass me the ball,” he said. “So first I learned Spanish. Then I learned English.”



IMAGE 1 OF 2
Photo: Liz Patafia, The Chronicle

Aseel Mohammad, 16 years old, from Afganistan stretches with his team in Soccer Without Borders at Mosswood park in Oakland, Calif., on Thursday, October 8, 2015.

Soccer Without Borders is on the cusp of its 10-year anniversary and officials believe the lessons learned about working with immigrant youth can be shared, not only in the United States but also with other countries trying to deal with a flood of immigrants.

David Given-Sjolander works for the Power of Sport, an organization based in Stockholm, and attended this week's gathering in San Francisco. His group is trying to achieve many of the same goals in Sweden, which takes in more immigrants per capita than any other European country.

"Sport breaks down barriers," he said. "It's the one thing people have in common. They feel at home."

Gucciardi was among those honored at the White House last summer, as a "Champion of Change" in conjunction with World Refugee Day.

"I felt a combination of being hopeful and uplifted, yet so much alarm about the state of displaced people," he said. "This is the new norm. An increasing shift of humanity."

Soccer Without Borders concentrates on five areas. The first is soccer, providing fields, equipment and coaching. The second is educational support. (According to Gucciardi, 95 percent of the program's Oakland participants graduate high school, a rate 35 percent higher than the Oakland average.) The group also concentrates on team-building activities, cultural exchange and civic engagement through service projects.

Language-learning aid

McVeigh cites studies that show learning a language is easier when accompanied by physical

movement. Another area of emphasis for Soccer Without Borders is engaging girls, “from all backgrounds and barriers,” McVeigh said. The organization employs athletic young women who have been raised in a post-Title IX world who encourage girls who are coming from cultures where they may not have been allowed to play sports.

“Our goal is to pay that forward,” McVeigh said.

Soccer Without Borders is training coaches to go into immigrant communities and become ambassadors. A future goal is to work with soccer clubs in Europe to brainstorm on programs. Some powerful soccer clubs have recently pledged aid, but may not know how to best channel it.

Sitting in San Francisco with two young men who are living examples of how soccer can make a difference, Gucciardi struggled with his emotions. He watched the teenagers open up in public, in a new language, about their lives.

“It’s beautiful,” he said. “It’s powerful.”

Aseel was asked how soccer has made a difference in his life.

“When I play soccer I feel happy,” he said.



Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle

Aseel Mohammad (left), 16 years old, and Dennis Escalante (right), 17 years old, and captains on their soccer team, attend a Soccer Without Borders meeting in San Francisco, Calif., on Wednesday, October 7, 2015. Soccer Without Borders, an east bay non profit hosts a roundtable discussion on how soccer can be a tool to help with the current refugee crisis.

“It helps me forget.”

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