



## HOOPS in the News

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# Going Camping

By Dave McKenna

Four centuries or so ago, the Spanish conquistadors showed the Mayans how to use the wheel. Only recently, and under far more benevolent circumstances, Bryan Weaver and a crew from Adams Morgan brought them the dunk.

Weaver, 30, is the heart and brains behind Hoops Sagrado, a D.C.-based cultural-exchange program that takes young men off a local blacktop and brings them to the mountains of western Guatemala to run a basketball camp.

The District's contingent, whose members tend to share upbringings of the sort not found in storybooks, gets crash courses in Spanish and, more important, the ways of the world outside the city. In return, the indigenous Mayans are exposed to a streetwise version of a game they bizarrely revere.

According to Weaver, himself an incurable basketball junkie, all involved parties view this as a worthy barter.

"It shows kids here poverty in Guatemala vs. poverty in D.C. and racism there vs. racism here," he says. "And the Mayans—well, they're basketball nuts."

The idea for this sporting diplomacy came to Weaver in 1994, when, in hopes of completing the foreign-language requirements for a degree from Howard University, he enrolled in a Spanish-immersion program in Guatemala. The school was run by the Mayan Indians in the highlands above a city called Quezaltengo.

After the five-hour language classes each day, Weaver would hang out in the Mayan communities and play ball.

"That's what I'd be doing if I were home in Adams Morgan," he says.

While hooping it up, he learned about the local culture, wars and all. He saw how the Mayans, descendants of an ancient civiliza-

tion that peaked 1,000 years ago in what is now Central America, had come out on the losing end of a protracted civil war with Guatemala's Spanish-Indian mixed-blood population, which, though a minority, controlled almost all of the country's money and power.

"The war was based almost exclusively on race," Weaver says. "The Mayans had been pushed higher into the mountains by the mixed-bloods, and most of the flatlands at the higher elevations had to be used as farmlands....But in the courtyards of every village, they'd have a basketball hoop."

It occurred to Weaver that the plight of the Mayans—the discrimination of a ruling class leading to undereducation, domestic dysfunction, and epidemic drug and alcohol abuse—was essentially the same as that faced by many of the young men he saw on the courts at Pierce Park off Columbia Road, his hoops hangout. And he thought each group could benefit from exposure to the other.

So, when Weaver returned to the States, he began bugging friends and colleagues from his past jobs with the Democratic Party and labor organizations, asking for help in funding his exchange program. He held happy hours for the cause. He came up with a name: Hoops Sagrado, which is Spanish for "sacred hoops."

By the spring of 1999, he had enough money and adult volunteers to get the program rolling. Weaver, who coaches Boys & Girls Club basketball and devotes his time to a number of causes, went to the Pierce Park crowd and asked if anybody was interested in taking the trip.

"I said I really wanted to show them that the world is lot bigger than that park," he says.

Several signed on. But, on the day before their departure that summer, with plane

tickets purchased and living arrangements in Guatemala already arranged, the whole project nearly collapsed. One of the kids suddenly panicked about being so far from home for three weeks, and his fear spread. In the end, only one pilgrim, Sean Thomas, got on the plane.

"I figured there was nothing that could happen to me down there that I hadn't already seen coming up," Thomas, 23, tells me. "You know, I didn't have the best childhood."

Thomas' life story is harrowing. He's been shot and robbed, and he did time in a Texas boot camp for drugs. His mother, who taught him how to play basketball when he was 5 years old, was murdered. About the only thing Thomas knew of his father, until recently, was that he was a crack addict. He bounced from relative to relative while going through Dunbar High School.

Along with being fearless, Thomas wanted to break in his newly acquired passport. "Sean didn't have a mother or father around to get the paperwork that the average kid would have," says Weaver. "He was essentially a ward of the city, so he had to go to a [social-services office], where he was handed a box that held all that was left of his childhood—little baby photos and some old certificates that still weren't enough for a passport. Sean finally had to track down his father, reconnect with him, and get him to write a letter to prove who [Sean] was. After all that, that passport was a badge of honor."

In Quezaltengo, Thomas got the star treatment. In games against the villagers, the crowd beside the court would chant "Sean" whenever he'd shoot.

Away from the court, things weren't so exhilarating. The mean streets of D.C. hadn't prepared Thomas for the poverty of the Mayan people. He saw small kids sleep-

ing alone on park benches, shirtless even in the cool evening air. Even when times were toughest, somebody had always given Thomas a roof and kept him warm.

“I really couldn’t believe how sad that made me feel,” Thomas says. “That got me thinking I really don’t have it too bad back home.”

Thomas took the shirt off his back, a favorite emblazoned with “Dragon” across the chest, and gave it to a young boy.

The smile he got in return, Thomas says, was the highlight of his trip. For the first time in his life, he was the mentor. Thomas admits he didn’t pick up much Spanish during the voyage, but he hardly came home empty-handed.

So the next time Thomas showed up at Pierce Park, he was packing enough wide-eyed tales to get other court regulars to join Weaver for the 2000 effort. And the villagers at the camp were so awed by the dunking of

one of last year’s counselors that rumors began circulating that Michael Jordan was in town, incognito. Funding for that program came from, among others, Fleet Feet, Ben & Jerry’s, and the Atlanta Hawks. (Weaver says the Washington Wizards never returned his calls.) Hoops Sagrado also paid the private-school tuition of 10 Mayan schoolgirls and to pave a basketball court.

Financially, everything’s good to go for this year’s camp. Thomas plans on joining Weaver in Guatemala once again in July to help run the camp, and the top counselor recently heard that a documentary crew might follow him down. In the meantime, you can find both of them on most afternoons playing ball against each other at Pierce Park. If Thomas has any influence with the Mayans, trash-talking may be D.C.’s next cultural export.

“Bryan’s pretty good, OK,” Thomas says, when asked to describe Weaver’s game. “But he ain’t me.” —Dave McKenna