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Out of the Scrum, Success

Memphis rugby program born of the Colby experience

By Devin O'Brien '12

On the first day of practice Abdul ran in socks so as not to ruin his only pair of shoes. From the side of the playground, kids smoking cigarettes heckled Ali, who had never run a lap before. It was 95 degrees under the Memphis sun, and the 30 kids were looking at me for an explanation as to why I was wearing short shorts and kicking around a ball that looked like a watermelon.

Only one player had ever heard the word rugby before.

That day I saw Darrien double over in a drill because he'd only had chips to eat all day. I heard Brygton had been suspended for gang affiliations and learned Jacari didn't have a home. And yet, in the midst of the realization of the odds stacked against my kids, despite the dropped passes and disorganized drills, what began in that public park has endured.

That daring group of kids has since grown into Memphis Inner City Rugby, a nonprofit organization with a mission to expand academic and athletic opportunity in underserved communities. Since I cofounded the organization with fellow Teach for America Corps member Shane Young in 2012, we've started the first four inner city rugby teams in Memphis. We have built bridges from neighborhoods where up to 90 percent of students can't afford a three-dollar school lunch and half don't graduate to high-achieving suburban schools. Through our weekly academic tracking, we identify where our kids are struggling, and we target academic interventions. This additional structure—coupled with the transformative discipline, dedication, and respect that characterize this demanding sport—has resulted in a 100-percent acceptance rate to college or the military. Ninety percent of our student athletes show academic improvement. Last summer, we celebrated our own Donovan Norphlet's full rugby scholarship to Life University, one of the most successful NCAA Division I programs in the country.

Since I arrived in Memphis, I have been forced to concede that there are deeply embedded problems in our country far too tenacious to solve in a lifetime. Especially in light of recent events, it's easy to perceive our nation as having lost its way, and perhaps its ability to find it again. Yet when I'm feeling helpless, I think about how Cody went an entire season without making a tackle, then stopped a runner in his tracks on the try line. I think about how Jacari went for weeks without a square meal, sleeping in a room without furniture, and still made it to Tennessee State University. And I think about Calvin, who went from gang affiliations to D1 recruitment letters and A's on his report card. Above all else, my experiences in Memphis affirm in me a simple notion: things that are most daunting are the very things that hold the most power to transform us.

Memphis is a far cry from Mayflower Hill. Yet, whatever we've achieved at MICR began with an idea that arose from, and defines, the Colby experience: our education endows us with the ability—and the responsibility—to go boldly into the world, design a future rooted in our passions, and strive to bend the arc of the moral universe towards justice. From phone calls with old friends, to *Colby Magazine* articles about how graduates apply their education around the globe, my alma mater constantly fuels my desire to pay forward the immense privileges I've been afforded.

During our first fundraiser, nearly four years ago, a huge box of cleats showed up at my door in Memphis. They'd come from a former teammate at Colby. I hadn't talked to him recently, nor solicited him for a donation. But no explanation was needed—not for me, or anyone who has called Colby home.