A STATE OF GROWTH IN THE EMPIRE STATE

By Sally Goggin, USA Field Hockey’s National Development Director

In April and May 2019, The Sophie Gerson Healthy Youth Foundation (SGHY), Columbia University Field Hockey Program and USA Field Hockey partnered to introduce the sport to 25 boys and girls from the Luisa Dessus Cruz Middle School, MS 302, in New York City.

Continuing Sophie Gerson’s legacy as a New York City public middle school physical education and health teacher and as President of Community School Board 2, the nonprofit foundation focuses on the mental and physical health of under-served middle school students. Gerson’s son Alan, a New York City lawyer, contacted USA Field Hockey in the fall of 2018 to inquire about starting a program. Two-time Olympian and current Columbia Head Coach Caroline Nelson-Nichols, coaching staff and student-athletes jumped at the opportunity to share their passion, volunteering their time and facility to conduct four clinics on the university’s field. USA Field Hockey meanwhile coordinated both groups to ensure that the young athletes would have appropriately sized sticks, balls, shin guards and mouthguards, as well as USA Field Hockey shirts and memberships.

“In reaching out to USA Field Hockey I was inspired by my mother,” said Gerson. “She grew up in the Bronx during the Great Depression when times were really tough for her family. She found an outlet in sports, and one sport she especially loved was field hockey. She spoke fondly of her days on the Walton High School team, often mimicking how she held the stick as she ran up and down the field. The sport clearly left a positive impact on her life. As part of continuing Sophie Gerson’s acclaimed physical education and health teaching and educational leadership, by working with USA Field Hockey and Columbia University, SGHY seeks to enable more young people to receive the benefits of field hockey as my mom did.”

Nelson-Nichols, an athlete representative on the USA Field Hockey Board of Directors, especially loves working with the young children and giving back to the sport.

“The Columbia University field hockey team is incredibly honored to partner with USA Field Hockey and the SGHY to help empower the next generation through sport,” commented Nelson-Nichols. “As Division I field hockey athletes, the team understands the value that sport impacts on people’s lives and the doors it opens for those who participate; therefore, they are dedicated to giving back to communities so that others can have access to similar opportunities. When the team learned of the partnership opportunity to merge the SGHY’s mission of promoting active lifestyles and teaching sports skills such as leadership, teamwork and self-awareness with USA Field Hockey’s mission to grow the game, they jumped at the chance. There is nothing more empowering than sharing the sport you love with others in hopes it can have the same positive impact it had on you. We are very proud to be part of this partnership and look forward to continuing to empower and teach others through a shared love and enjoyment of field hockey.”

Students participated in four sessions, two in April and two in May. Sessions were held on Friday afternoons and included skill development through small-game play. The goal is to continue the program by expanding to additional schools in the months ahead.

While students at Luisa Dessus Cruz Middle School, MS 302 were introduced to the game, several of the Lions athletes were ecstatic to be ambassadors of the sport to another generation.

“I’ve enjoyed working with SGHY because
it provides athletic opportunities that are not elsewhere available to these children," noted Brooke Gasser, freshman. “Seeing the excitement of the children and their development makes me proud to be part of such a wonderful organization.”

“I am very passionate about sharing my love for the game with kids in our community,” added Kelsey Farkas, sophomore. “The Sophie Gerson clinics offered our team a great opportunity to teach the game to kids who might never have seen or played it.”

Despite weather in the area restricting outdoor play, Nelson-Nichols and staff improvised, bringing the Lions to the middle school gym instead, determined to make this a reality.

“It was electrifying,” continued Gerson. “Our middle school students took to the sport and to Columbia athletes with great enthusiasm. None had ever held a field hockey stick before, and it is probable that none would have if not for this program. Our middle school students were awed by the stick’s size and shape and thrilled to grasp it. The students, boys and girls, performed their drills navigating the ball with their sticks across the gym floor with the intensity and determination of true athletes. They rooted vociferously for their teammates in the contests the Columbia University coaches organized. The Columbia students became role models for athleticism and college aspiration.”

The program not only gave students who might not have been athletically active the chance to get involved in a sport, but also made themselves distinguishable with the sticks they used. It became clear that in addition to the particular field hockey techniques and general athletic skills, the students were learning skills for life and developing greater self-esteem. As it wound up, they could hardly wait for the next session.

“They reacted with welcome disbelief when we announced that they would become members of USA Field Hockey,” concluded Gerson. “It really lifted their self-image that such a group would come to the South Bronx and welcome them into an official national organization.”

USA Field Hockey would like to thank Alan Gerson, Barbara Palmer-Greene, Harry Malakoff, Dr. Leonard Golubchick, the Sophie Gerson Healthy Youth Foundation and Columbia University Field Hockey program. SGHY and Columbia already have plans to expand and continue the program in the future, adding at least one additional school in 2020. USA Field Hockey’s hope is that these student-athletes will enjoy their experience and want to continue in the sport with indoor or outdoor play.

ACCESSIBILITY & INCLUSION...

are core values of the USA Field Hockey ADM. If you are interested in growing the game in your community by supporting diversity, accessibility and inclusion initiatives, please reach out to sprotdevelopment@usafieldhockey.com. USA Field Hockey works to fuel and support growth throughout the country and encourages all members to share their love of the game.