



“You have to be willing to have the hard conversations”: Anna Barrett of Reclaim Childhood on using sports to create safe and inclusive communities for local and refugee youth

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Eleanore Catolico: Please introduce yourself and your organization, and tell me what's distinctive about your approach in the field of youth mental health.

Anna Barrett: I'm Anna Barrett. I'm the executive director of Reclaim Childhood. Reclaim Childhood creates safe and inclusive spaces for local and refugee youth in Jordan primarily through the tool of playing sports, but also working with coaches and building community within the scope of a sports environment.

One thing that makes us unique is that we are intensely non-clinical. We're focused on building this community, building this system of support, building belonging for youth, and through that helping to support their healing, their mental health, their mental wellbeing.

Eleanore Catolico: What types of sports do the young people participate in?

Anna Barrett: We primarily play football, soccer, depending where you are in the world. Basketball once it starts to get rainy and colder in Jordan, and then frisbee in the spring. Overarching summer programming looks at all sports and physical activity, and how important that is to youth. Our work is focused on girls and women in Jordan.

Eleanore Catolico: What is something others might find surprising about your work?

Anna Barrett: How girls latch on to sports. Even if they've never played it before, there's a side of girls that wants to play and compete. In this region of the world, people don't always assume that to be the case.

Eleanore Catolico: In the regions that you work in, has there been a solidified sports culture among those young people, or is this something new and exciting for them?

Anna Barrett: Jordan has always had a sports culture, and we work with a lot of refugees, so people from other countries in the region, but there hasn't been much of a women's sports culture. The Jordanian national team just qualified for the World Cup for the first time, and that's a nationwide celebration, but this ability for girls and women to also participate in the same way hasn't really existed, especially in the communities that we serve.

We see a divide between some of the higher-income communities where girls might have additional access to sports and the lower-income communities in which we work, where they almost never have access to sports.

Eleanore Catolico: The Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing Co-Lab has three focus areas, building young people's resilience, giving young people agency, and helping young people build a sense of community and belonging. What does your work focus on and what contribution does your work make in that area?

Anna Barrett: We do all three of those things. We have about half refugees and half Jordanians. Many people are newcomers or they've been in Jordan for a while, but there is still segregation between refugee groups and Jordanians.

It's important at this stage of development for girls to feel belonging. Agency and resilience are also things we do well. We try to use a trauma-informed approach to all of the sports activities that we do. As they build their skills and their leadership on the field, they're also building their capacity to be agents of change off the field as well.

Eleanore Catolico: Can you talk a little bit about peer support and mentorship?

Anna Barrett: The core of our program is the coaches. We work with all women coaches, and they are all from the communities that we serve. These are people who look like them, people who live a few streets over, people that their parents and families are comfortable with.

Our coaches act as mentors for the girls as they move through the program. We have a big focus on teenage girls and their leadership with programs focused on building team leadership skills off the field.

Eleanore Catolico: What are the benefits or advantages of recruiting from the community?

Anna Barrett: It makes it more accessible for girls. It is a new concept in many communities, and introducing it through people from their communities is a comfortable way for families to engage. Many of our coaches didn't have the chance to play themselves growing up, so they can speak to what it looks like to be able to play, why girls should be able to play, and how this might affect people's daughters.

Eleanore Catolico: What has been the engagement like with the families?

Anna Barrett: Our coaches talk to our families all the time, especially the mothers. They directly recruit girls and then try to keep them in the program for as long as the program serves them or as long as they are in Jordan.

We run focus groups with mothers at the end of each season and we run specific programming for mothers and sometimes extended families to give mothers the chance to come meet our coaches, even more see them on the field. They get to play themselves.

Eleanore Catolico: How do you collaborate with other organizations working in the same focus area as you do?

Anna Barrett: We try to stay connected to this wider global infrastructure, specifically through organizations like Common Goal, which is a consortium of soccer for social change organizations. Through them, we recently had the chance to work on a project with regional partners in Jordan, the West Bank and Lebanon. We did a learning year cohort around gender equality, specifically gender equity within these types of sport for development organizations.

Then we have intensely local partnerships. We've been building our network of referral partners where we can send girls or families when they surpass what we're able to do.

Then there are organizations that are even more local. Since we work in different communities in Jordan, sometimes we have specific partners within one community that opened up the community for us, perhaps provide field space or other options, or that we work in joint programming with their girls' or boys' families sometimes as well.

Eleanore Catolico: What do they like about your program? What is inspiring their desire to collaborate with you?

Anna Barrett: One side is that not a lot of people are doing what we're doing in Jordan. Communities are excited to see us.

Organizations in Jordan, for a long time, even refugee-serving organizations, were Syrian-focused because of how the international funding worked and the sheer number of Syrians that were in the country. We work with all refugee groups, all migrant groups, all Jordanians. We don't restrict based on nationality. That's another thing that comes up is how inclusive we are and how we engage in the communities with all groups.

Eleanore Catolico: Can you talk about how sports have been a way to bring these groups from different cultural backgrounds together?

Anna Barrett: Sports is a great tool if designed correctly. Rolling out a soccer ball in the middle of the field and putting together a bunch of people from different backgrounds isn't always a recipe for success. We want to design these programs to use sports in a

positive way to bring people together. For example, we intentionally mix the teams so that girls have to play with other people.

We work on team building, not just sports. We work on fun games with teams and problem-solving on the field with one another. We intentionally have diverse coaching staffs as well.

You have to be willing to have the hard conversations. We've heard things pop up that maybe they had heard at home or heard outside of sports that were discriminatory against other groups. We make sure that our coaches are able to handle these hard conversations, so the girls know that this isn't a discriminatory space, but one where everyone is welcome.

Sports, if you design it in a collaborative way, gives you a good container for girls to come and experience. Maybe it's hard to have a conversation with someone you don't know, but it's not hard to pass them the ball or score a goal or celebrate, or work together to finish a drill.

Eleanore Catolico: What, if any, emerging work in this field are you excited about?

Anna Barrett: Around mental health and wellbeing, we see the gold standard as one-on-one therapy and it's an unrealistic view of how to support youth in their mental health and their well-being. When clinical work is available and necessary also having that, but going to youth where they are, where they can afford, and also where culturally it's a bit more acceptable than being in a clinical setting.

Eleanore Catolico: Can you share an example that illustrates the impact of your work?

Anna Barrett: We had a girl who was born in Syria and came to Jordan pretty young. She had experienced war and displacement at a very young age and wasn't comfortable speaking for most of her first years in Jordan.

She told us that coming to RC helped her re-find her voice. As she became more comfortable with the girls, as she learned these skills, as she became part of the community, she felt more comfortable to use her voice not only at Reclaim Childhood, but also at school and out in the community.

Every day we have girls who say RC helped them be more confident. We have a new generation of girls who are more confident, and who do have better peer and mentor networks.

Eleanore Catolico: Are you seeing them able to take space in different ways outside of the sport they're playing?

Anna Barrett: In our teen leadership program, they have an off-field space to discuss leadership skills, to discuss issues that are important to them. They also do community

service projects as part of that, and they lead them from start to finish. They budget, they plan, they implement.

Outside of that, girls tell us that their school lives have changed, that they've been more willing to join different activities. Mothers tell us it starts largely with social confidence like with more friends or being more engaged. As the teenagers get out in the world more, having a bigger presence in their communities.

Eleanore Catolico: Can you describe something that you tried that didn't work, but that you learned from?

Anna Barrett: A few years ago, we went through this full expansion process in Jordan and launched a new site. The first season was hard. We realized we had done the preparation in certain ways, but we forgot how much practice our coaches had.

It is important for coaches to have significant training before they get out there with the girls, and with them as the key, we have to double down on their selection, their recruitment, their training. Giving them chances to practice and chances to fail while coaching and receiving mentorship was really the key to starting programs.

Now we have overhauled our expansion processes and the amount of training and focus we give the coaches.

Eleanore Catolico: How do you work with other partners?

Anna Barrett: Our most recent hire is a partnerships associate. As we've grown, we wanted someone to focus on this specifically. She either sets up individual meetings with partners or attends some of these gatherings that are a bit bigger.

We have four full-time staff. As such a small organization, working with partnerships multiplies what we're able to learn, what we're able to know, and where we're able to be. Working in partnership makes us feel like a bigger organization. Our budget's about \$500,000. Jordan has been a hub for foreign aid, so there are a lot of multimillion-dollar organizations working in Jordan.

Eleanore Catolico: Aside from funding, are there any challenges that you faced or are currently facing that you haven't been able to solve yet?

Anna Barrett: Facilities are our granular-level challenge. Jordan doesn't always have the sports spaces available that we need.

Regional conflict has been one of our big challenges for the past couple of years.

Our geopolitical challenge is that the last few years in the region have been tumultuous and devastating for the populations that we work with. We work with a ton of Palestinians, we work with a lot of Sudanese girls. Conflict has felt like it's been on Jordan's doorstep for the past couple of years. It changes the environment that girls are living in, that our coaches are programming in.

Eleanore Catolico: What insights or teachable lessons can you take from your work that you think others could use?

Anna Barrett: The deep community relationships — you can go so much further if you're connected in that way.

The other thing I would say, and I'm stealing this from someone who said it to me: joy can be an outcome. Is it hard to measure? Is it hard to track? Is it hard to put in a donor report? Absolutely.

Eleanore Catolico: How would you define current attitudes towards youth mental health? Have you seen attitudes toward youth mental health change in your community?

Anna Barrett: There is a process of changing — not compared to the US, where it feels like youth mental health is on every panel. I don't find that in Jordan, but I do find that there's a broader openness to youth wellbeing.

It's been a hard few years for youth in the region, between displacement and the pandemic. With the conflict in the region, it's been a lot of hits in recent years.

There's no turning away from the fact that kids might be struggling, youth aren't as mentally well as they could be. Parents and communities are open to what could help our youth. They probably don't call it mental health, but yes, focused on the well-being of youth.

There's also been more research on the effects of displacement and the effects of the pandemic.

Eleanore Catolico: What barriers to changing mindsets exist, and what do you think is needed to change the way people think about youth mental health or wellbeing in general?

Anna Barrett: It's de-stigmatizing the concept of mental health, and that there's nothing wrong with you if you're struggling with your mental health. A big barrier is the cultural resistance to talking about it, but other places have shown us that there can be a lot of cultural change around that.

Our coaches have gone through trauma-informed training, where they talk about the effects of trauma on the brain, and what, as coaches, they can do to help mitigate that on the field.

Eleanore Catolico: Do you have an example of a breakthrough, or a reflection from a person you've worked with where they started to shift within themselves how they felt about it?

Anna Barrett: In trauma-informed coaching, one of the things they often talk about is that behavior tells a story. When a kid shows up and they're acting out in a different way,

they're not doing that to ruin your day, they're doing that because they're struggling. Their behavior is telling a story about how they are struggling.

There are girls who coaches immediately connect with, and there are girls who they don't. So, thinking about the girls that you don't, why aren't you connecting with them as well? Being a coach is hard, but when they started to think through why these girls were showing up like this was something that was a big change in terms of how we viewed that behavior.

Eleanore Catolico: How do you hear from or incorporate youth voices in shaping your work, or the broader narrative or feelings about youth mental health?

Anna Barrett: We talk to our girls a lot through focus groups, through basic surveys around how they're feeling.

We give them leadership opportunities so that they can be a part of the programming themselves. Twenty percent of our coaches are former participants.

A lot of our coaches are youth themselves. We work with girls from 6 to 18 years old. Most of our coaches are 25 and under.

Eleanore Catolico: What resources do you want and need besides funding that you think could be helpful, and are there any resources that you're currently using that have been helpful?

Anna Barrett: Monitoring and evaluation capacity is something that often comes up in terms of how much you can track impact. We're small. There are so many things that we've asked older organizations, even in terms of navigating stuff like government regulations and HR things. If someone solved a problem, finding and having them help us through it has been a valuable tool for us.

Eleanore Catolico: In terms of showing impact, can you talk a little bit more about what that means?

Anna Barrett: Especially with youth, the impact of things that happen in childhood isn't always visible right away. We can't track how that shows up in their lives when they're 25. It's sometimes hard with youth where you have to be more process-oriented.

We don't have the capacity to track one girl for 20 years of her life and see what happened. We have been more process-oriented of doing the right inputs, and drawing on research that already exists.

Eleanore Catolico: Have you been approached by researchers to study the work that you're doing and see what effect it's having on young people?

Anna Barrett: Occasionally. That can be helpful in bringing new tools or qualitative research tools. We don't have anyone who's been interested in a longer-term project, and I do worry about how much time it would take up for our girls as well.

Eleanore Catolico: What's the most important question you have for the Co-Lab? What is the question they should be asking right now?

Anna Barrett: How do we maintain this, especially in the current environment? How do you maintain this kind of culture of supporting youth mental health and wellbeing, especially also in a funding-scarce environment?

Eleanore Catolico is a freelance journalist, writer and editor based in Michigan. Her solutions journalism has focused on initiatives in K-12 schools that address trauma, cultivate affirming and inclusive spaces and foster healthy peer connections.

* This interview has been edited and condensed.