

## Nicholas Barrett: Creating Community Wherever You Go

By *Jordi Aguilar*

Opening up the zoom call, Nick Barrett greeted me with the same humorous, yet personal greeting common amongst those in the non-profit, youth development field. He is fun, he speaks with heart, and his interpersonal skills shine through in every exchange you are lucky to have with him. Within a few minutes of meeting Nick, you can tell that this is someone who has spent a large amount of energy working on properly communicating with people, making them feel heard and understood. These skills have been sharpened, out of necessity, by the pressure that Nick has endured in the unimaginably stressful role of working with inner city youths. Nick has spent all of the last 8 years of his life involved in youth development, immersing himself in the communities of different countries and cities, across a wide range of programs, all in service of one common goal: developing troubled youth into respectable members of society, giving them the tools to navigate the dangerous world around them, and if able, improve upon it.



Today, Nick refers to himself as a ‘Youth Developer’, a role, and a duty, that he has carried across a variety of titles throughout his career. His youth development journey started when he became the Head Cadet Officer of his local police force in London. Soon after, he took on the role of Assistant Unit Director at Boys and Girls Club San Francisco’s Camp Mendocino, later being promoted to the Program Director and Director of Staff Experience. From this entry into the Boys and Girls Club, Nick was soon promoted to Learning and Development Coordinator, leading his way to where he currently resides, as Site Director of the Gateway High School Boys and Girls Club. At Gateway, a Charter School in the heart of San Francisco, Nick

oversees a small team serving the school's troubled youths, managing the daily chaos that ensues.

He started his career civically engaged on the frontlines, directly working with underserved youths on a one to one and group basis, advocating for them, talking them through their distresses, being a friend, and most importantly; making them feel heard. Though as he has been promoted to more supervising roles, he has taken a step back from the frontlines and become more engaged with the broader structural issues backgrounding youth development organizations. Regardless, his goal remains the same; providing the best resources for those in underserved communities, whether this takes the form of talking to a troubled youth one-to-one or advocating for a policy to increase funding for youth sports programs, he gets the job done.

### **Finding community**

Nick grew up in Goiana, Brazil, later moving to the United Kingdom with his mom and dad at the age of ten. Moving across the world at a young age did not sit well for Nick, however, as he had lost his greatest support network: the large extended family that had raised him in Brazil. Without a strong community behind him, Nick was lost, without purpose, without friends, and most crucially, without guidance. Like many youth in such a position Nick began to get into trouble both with the law and at school, culminating to a point where he was mandated to join the youth Cadet program for his local police department, where he would be disciplined in a military-style environment. While Nick was not enthused to join the Cadet's in the beginning, he eventually found that his place amongst other Cadet's, also troubled youths, gave him the sense of belonging that he had been lacking. This positive community, along with the role models that Nick was exposed to, inspired him to continue with the Cadet program even after having completed his mandatory service, moving on to serve as Head Cadet upon turning 18.

Nick sees his journey with the Cadets as a good example of the path commonly followed by those involved in youth development: beginning their journey as a troubled youth themselves, reluctant to participate in their respective program, only to later discover a sense of belonging and mentorship that inspires them to continue with the program ultimately ending up on the other side helping those in the places they once were themselves.

With the Cadets Nick discovered just how much he enjoyed mentorship. Creating a positive image for troubled youth, and using said image to guide them toward life lessons in integrity, leadership, and community, provided Nick with a sense of responsibility he had never felt before. His talent for leadership and communication blossomed, quoting his time as Head Cadet's as the moment when he fell in love with youth development.

### **Adapting to different youth groups**

Nick's civic engagement did not stop with the Cadets. Once he discovered that his passion was in youth mentorship, he began to look for other opportunities to serve communities outside of his vicinity. His search ended with his discovery of Camp Mendocino, a small

wilderness camp intended to serve inner city youth from the Boys and Girls Clubs of San Francisco.

Flying to California expecting the unexpected, Nick found himself having to deal with both the culture shock of living in the U.S. for the first time, and the new set of challenges presented by working with U.S. inner-city youths coming from areas much more violent than those he encountered in London.

Working up at Camp, Nick noticed that the hyper-disciplinary, drill-instructor methods he had developed with the Cadets would not function well with the Bay-Area youth he was now dealing with. The new methods of youth development that were modeled at camp, in restorative justice, positive reinforcement strategies, etc., took some time for Nick to grow accustomed to, admitting that it was “a big learning curve”.



*Nick with four of his favorite Gateway Club members*

Through these tribulations, however, Nick reformed his approach to better suit his new environment. Nick's goal became less focused on disciplining the children, realizing that the greatest impact he could have would be to mold himself into a figure that youths could trust. He wants youth to feel safe when they are with him, or as he puts it, being their “number one fan, supporter, and advocate”. For youth who have grown up in circumstances where they have no stable adult figures, having a supportive adult who they feel safe with can fundamentally alter the direction of their lives in a positive manner. If Nick can become someone that they trust, who they feel safe with, then he feels as if he has been a great benefit to their character. Nick cites this as the greatest lesson he has learned throughout his career in youth development.

### Fighting for worker's rights

On top of an array of lessons in youth development, Camp also gave Nick his greatest opportunity, meeting his wife Graciella. After immediately falling in love the two decided that they would move to San Francisco after the summer ended, taking up jobs working for local branches of the Boys and Girls Club SF.

Working for a non-profit full-time, however, opened Nick's eyes to an entire array of issues he had never expected to be engaged with. Having to live in San Francisco, one of the most expensive cities in the world, while working with his wife to sustain themselves in a one bedroom apartment, revealed just how weakly youth developers are compensated for their work. Despite enduring highly stressful conditions which repeatedly venture on dangerous, Nick and his wife were still making less than one-third the average San Francisco salary. This discovery not only discouraged him financially, it also affected how he viewed his work. Enduring such a stressful job, where "every single day, something bad happens", it is difficult to keep persevering when "could be making the same amount of money stacking shelves at Safeway". This, Nick believes, is the reason why youth development has such an incredibly high turnover rate, with each Boys and Girls Club having around 40-50 open positions at all times.

The overall sense of injustice Nick felt upon discovering how little youth developers were paid sparked a passion in him. He feels that oftentimes the wool is pulled over the eyes of youth developers, their benefits and pay and rarely mentioned or prioritized, as they are expected to maintain engagement in their work for purely moral reasons. Nick claims that "**when you work in a nonprofit, you take a vow of poverty...we are not cared for**".



*Nick at the March for Education in Oakland, CA*



This lack of compensation, he feels, not only negatively affects youth developers, it also trickles down to the effectiveness youth development organizations have on kids. If you can't retain any good talent because your salary cannot compete, then the youth you serve will not have consistent, competent role models.

In his newly promoted position as Site Director of the Gateway High School branch, Nick now has a place at the table amongst those who make the decisions regarding the broader structural decisions of the Boys and Girls Club. In this new position he now advocates for higher worker pay, better benefits, and better access to funding. He argues that youth developers are on the frontlines, maintaining positive personal connections with youths that are the heart and soul of these broader youth development organizations, if your workers are not properly taken care of then these connections will deteriorate and so will the positive impact these organizations have.



*Nick with two of his team members at Gateway H.S.*

### **Looking toward the future**

Nick currently loves his position running the Gateway high school branch. He loves the newfound responsibility and the challenge of dealing with chaotic situations. The branch is brand new, ridden with adversity, and it is Nick's job to steer it in a positive direction. In this role he practices civic engagement both on a broader structure level, by advocating for the policies that trickle down across youth development organizations, and on a personal level, still maintaining close personal relationships with the kids that he is so very talented at connecting with.

Looking toward the future he hopes to become a policy advocate for education, on either a state or national level. Here, he hopes to fight the slow deterioration of youth programs that has

occurred over the last decade, ideally lifting up other youth developers both in pay and benefits, while also boosting the programs themselves all in order to benefit the children. He feels that education has been ignored, “youth are viewed as parasites” rather than as the precious future. To reinvigorate nationwide concern for education, a re-prioritization of sorts, is his end all be all dream. Whether this goal is met or not, what Nick has accomplished early in his career cannot be ignored, he has had more of a net positive impact on the world than most people do in a lifetime, and he has changed more lives than one can count.