

# A thousand smiles and High Fives all year long through Basketball

Special Correspondent



**A** Powai couple's boys grew up in the US playing basketball in their school days just as many others but once they took up careers in the corporate world - the boys decided to give back to their community by coaching basketball after work and on weekends. This inspired the Powai couple *Usha and Sundar*, residents of Hiranandani Gardens to

start an NGO *Hi5 Youth Foundation* in providing FREE basketball coaching and life skills training to underprivileged boys and girls ages 9 to 11 years in Mumbai.

Why Basketball? There were questions raised by the couple's acquaintances and friends. "We scouted for one whole year to many educational institutions and few institutions relating to

women and children in interior Maharashtra and Gujarat. Having visited many tribal schools and residential schools - we discovered there are millions of good-hearted people doing amazing work. Sports is also education and we have not come across anyone doing much in this space," said the couple.

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Sport in India is an optional activity available only to children going to private schools and sports with coaching is expensive and available only to the elite. The children from the slums have lot of potential and structured sport activity is unaffordable. "We have to tap their talent and energy, instill in them the right passion, so that they stay focused in schools and become wonderful citizens of the country. They are the most enthusiastic, loving and affectionate kids that I have ever seen," says Usha Sundar. "The children who are cooped up in their 8X8 space in their hutments with 6 other members in the family, feels absolutely liberated. There is a sense of joy and happiness just to come out in the open space and play." She further adds.

"We believe in young coaches who could be role models to these children. We believe in structured coaching, therefore, our sessions are planned for the weeks just like in school teaching. My ex-colleague P Ramaaswamy (ex-university player) now

our co-founder designs and implements the technicalities in the curriculum, mentors and trains coaches on weekends." says Sundar.

The program has been designed based on international methods adapted to Indian conditions, to help children learn basketball, in a FUN environment that builds their confidence and love for sport. "It will teach fundamental life skills, teamwork, goal-setting and hard work. Children who collaborate with others towards a common goal through sports, exhibit traits like cooperation and persistence, which provides the foundation for them to become successful in their careers and family lives when they reach adulthood." adds Sundar.

Having started in April 2015 with 120

kids in Ghatkopar YMCA, currently Hi5 has around 1,000 boys and girls in 16 centers in Mumbai in this program (13 BMC schools, 2 YMCA centers, and St Arnolds School, Andheri E). The children are provided Jerseys, Shoes and healthy snacks after every practice. They girls and boys train together (no gender discrimination) 3 times a week for 1.5 hours each all round the year. Monsoons are meant for off-season activity.

Hi5's policy is always to applaud and appreciate every little progress the children make and kids are happy getting that attention. "Every month, we also give small awards like "student of the month" that encourages positive behavior, leadership,

drive and of course attendance. Today, every child wants to earn that "student of the month" and is motivated to stay in the program," says Usha Sundar

It has been a magical first year for Hi 5 lighting up smiles in a 1,000 children. In the coming year we are looking to expand the program to boarding schools around Mumbai for tribal and orphaned children and add an Intermediate level of coaching for our advanced children.

Look out for the Hi 5 trained basketball boys and girls school teams to score big in the Mumbai scene in the coming years.

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