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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## Serving a Community in Crisis

Teacher Chip Johnston starts a CrossFit affiliate in one of the nation's most impoverished states and offers free classes to all students and teachers of the Milwaukee Public Schools system. Emily Beers reports.

By Emily Beers

September 2012

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All images: Chip Johnston

In some ways, CrossFit MPS will be just another CrossFit affiliate: it will seek to get people more fit than they have ever been in their lives.

On the other hand, CrossFit MPS, which stands for Milwaukee Public Schools, will be anything but just another CrossFit box.

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Its founder and head coach, Chip Johnston, explained it best in his application essay to become affiliated.

"I am sure the events that have led me to write this essay explaining why I would like to open a CrossFit affiliate are both ordinary and extraordinary," he wrote. "The reason I know that they are in part common is because the combined experiences that led me to the discovery of CrossFit, and how it has changed my life, are largely the same as those that come out of thousands of CrossFit affiliates and are retold countless times on CrossFit's online discussion boards. However, the reason I know they are in part uncommon is because of my vision of how CrossFit can serve in many different ways a community that is not in need but rather in crisis."

The community he was talking about in his essay is Milwaukee. The crisis he was referring to is the growing number of impoverished, nutritionally misguided, overweight, out-of-shape high-school students in the city. And Johnston's idea of serving others has become the backbone of CrossFit MPS, a nonprofit affiliate.

Johnston, who is a full-time teacher at MacDowell Montessori School, will volunteer his time and offer free CrossFit classes to all students and teachers of the Milwaukee Public Schools district starting this month.

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**"When I saw the success that I had through CrossFit, I felt obliged to pay it forward."**

**—Chip Johnston**

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### **The Why and the How**

Johnston considers himself one of the lucky ones. He had a blessed childhood, with parents who encouraged him to get involved in sports as often as he could.

Eventually, he found himself playing college soccer at the University of Wisconsin. After graduation—like many others—he let his fitness slip, quickly seeing his body decline from fit to unfit.

"There was a serious reduction in activity and (an increase in) the decrepitude that accompanied it," said Johnston, who gained 40 lb. after college.



***Johnston comes from a family of teachers and considers it his obligation to help others.***

Luckily, he soon found CrossFit, which nursed his body back to health. Suddenly, he was once again inspired by what his body was able to do. And more importantly, he was inspired by the way his overall health improved.

When Johnston started teaching in Milwaukee, he immediately noticed the festering problem around him, a crisis of health and fitness that was growing bigger and bigger. The vast majority of the students who attend MacDowell Montessori School are considered underprivileged, which only makes them greater targets for poor nutrition and fitness, Johnston explained.

"If you came into our classrooms, you'd see backpacks full of stuff that comes in plastic bags. You'd see chips and soda. And you'd see the obese children," he said.

Johnston added: "Wisconsin is the fourth-most-impoverished state in the United States at the moment. Most of my students are fed government-subsidized lunches every day, usually made up of processed food. Fitness isn't a priority for most of them."

Johnston, who comes from a family of teachers, said he felt compelled to help.

"My mother always told me that everyone benefits from the well-being of everyone else," said Johnston, who is a social-studies teacher and the International Baccalaureate coordinator at his school.

"I think service is so important, not just with schools, but in general. That's the way the U.S. is going to get better ... is through people who are service-oriented. And when I saw the success that I had through CrossFit, I felt obliged to pay it forward."



***This ordinary-looking space will soon be the home of extraordinary fitness.***

And so began the concept of CrossFit MPS.

The next step for Johnston was to write a grant application to fund the training and equipment required to open CrossFit MPS. And, of course, he had to apply to CrossFit Inc. for affiliation. As Coach Glassman has said, wanting to serve others is an important part of being a CrossFit affiliate, and the MPS application was accepted.

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**—Chip Johnston**

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By June 2012, all the paperwork and technicalities were out of the way. Everything was approved and the wheels were in fast motion. Now it was time to transform the basement of his high school into CrossFit MPS.

“We basically took over the weight room at the school, threw out all the machines and crappy equipment, and placed a big order with Rogue Fitness,” said Johnston, who spent his summer getting CrossFit MPS ready for its grand opening this month.

On top of physically preparing the space, Johnston devoted countless hours to creating warm-ups and coming up with programming ideas, visiting other CrossFit affiliates in the area to observe classes, and building the CrossFit MPS website.

“I don’t know if I could put a total number of hours on it, but I worked on it most days. None of it ever felt like work because it’s something I’m so passionate about,” Johnston said.

He said he can’t wait for it all to begin. He has been letting people know about his new space all summer by sending emails to students and staff to prepare them for CrossFit classes this fall.

“The plan is to start out small. I’m assuming we’re going to have mostly people from our school at first, but eventually we want to have kids from other schools, too,” he said. “But I don’t want to take on more people than we can coach properly, so I’d like to see slow growth.”

If all goes well, Johnston might not be able to keep up with the potential demand. The Milwaukee Public School district has 80,000 students and 6,000 employees to draw from, so Johnston might very well find himself opening another affiliate in the near future to make room for the bodies.

For now, Johnston is simply hoping to inspire the students at his school to take control of their health at a young age.

His vision for CrossFit MPS is to see both students and teachers embrace the concept of gaining extraordinary fitness. And if all goes well, one day this extraordinary fitness will simply feel ordinary in Milwaukee schools.



#### **About the Author**

*Emily Beers, a CrossFit Journal staff writer, finished a master’s degree in journalism at the University of Western Ontario in the spring of 2009. Upon graduation, she worked as a sportswriter at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games, where she covered figure skating and short-track speed skating. Currently, she hosts **WOD HOG**, a not-always-PG publication of the CrossFit Vancouver School of Fitness. She ruptured her Achilles tendon in December 2010 and served as the Canada West Regional Media Director while recovering from surgery. Beers also competed in the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games on CrossFit Vancouver’s team. She finished third at the 2012 Canada West Regional.*