

Boston Sunday Globe

FEBRUARY 27, 2011

TODAY'S GLOBE SPORTS SECTION

‘ I want the kids out there to know there are alternatives
to the life they see on the streets.’

TOME BARROS

Barros's mission to change lives

Basketball his vehicle for goodwill

By **Bob Hohler**
GLOBE STAFF

Bullets would fly and someone from his neighborhood would die. The law of averages told him so.

When Tome Barros departed Uphams Corner in Dorchester last summer to try to change the world — Barros is the first recipient of a \$25,000 international sabbatical grant aimed at improving children's lives through basketball — he anticipated hearing along the way about another senseless killing back home.

The moment came 44 days after he began his 10-month odyssey. The son of Cape Verdean immigrants, Barros, 24, was teaching children in Senegal about striving for the best in life and basketball when word arrived that his cousin, David Martins, was shot to death on a Dorchester sidewalk. Martins was murdered 10 years after Barros lost another cousin, Michael Tavares, to gunfire on the streets.

To be young and Cape Verdean in parts of Dorchester and Roxbury has spelled danger since a conflict between Cape Verdean factions in 1995 turned into a street war. The death toll has topped 25, according to police estimates, while dozens have been wounded, and many others are behind bars.

His community in crisis, Barros is training to help rescue it. When he returns in April, he plans to honor his slain cousins and help save the next generation of Dorchester's Cape Verdean youth by applying the teaching experience he gained in the back country of Senegal and the violent slums of Brazil on the streets of Boston.

Barros is the face of a better tomorrow in a city scarred by a rising tide of homicides. Of the 72 murders last year in Boston — up nearly 50 percent from 2009 — few were more shocking than the shooting death of a 14-year-old who was allegedly ambushed on his scooter by two Cape Verdean youths a mile from Barros's home.





Lindsey and Justin Kittredge are the founders of Shooting Touch, a program designed to improve young lives in Boston and overseas. (Essdras M Suarez/Globe Staff)

“I want the kids out there to know there are alternatives to the life they see on the streets,” said Barros, who has embraced the values he learned from his parents, teachers, priests, and mentors.

“I want the kids to see me as a role model they can follow away from all of that,” he said by phone from Cape Verde, an island nation off northwest Africa.

Cape Verde is the last stop on Barros’s 10,000-mile mission, a journey on which he has exemplified the spirit of the Peace Corps and the power of sports to improve society. On each stop, he has spent days inviting boys and girls to basketball clinics, then weeks teaching them not only about the game but the power of education, leadership, and healthy living.

He carries with him the hopes of a South Boston couple — Justin and Lindsey Kittredge — who four years ago launched Shooting Touch Inc., a nonprofit that first served needy children in Boston, then went global.

“Tome has surpassed our expectations on every level,” said Lindsey Kittredge. “He has been a gift for us.”

His greatest contribution could be helping to transform the culture of crime and violence back home. For 19 years, the challenge has largely fallen to Paulo De Barros, director of the Catholic Charities Teen Center at St. Peter’s Church in Dorchester and president of Cape Verdean Community UNIDO.

Mayor Thomas M. Menino last year honored De Barros’s peace efforts by naming him Crime Fighter of the Year.

“I’ve been doing this work 19 years and the community has been lacking the young leaders we need to step up,” De Barros said. “Tome has it all: the vision, the innovation, and a special talent for connecting with kids. He could make a huge difference.”

Connection through ‘Touch’

De Barros has twice led youths, including Barros, on goodwill basketball missions to Cape Verde. On each trip, Barros lugged extra clothes to give to poor children, some of whom had no shoes. Barros said he lives by a motto he learned at Boston College High School: “Be a man for others.”

Now he is a humanitarian for the Kittredges, who once knew little about the deadly violence in Dorchester. They had privileged youths — Justin playing basketball for Northfield-Mount Hermon, Lindsey for Rivers — before Justin played hoop at James Madison University and Lindsey joined the lacrosse team at the University of Vermont.

Justin, 34, was so consumed by basketball that he joined Canton-based Reebok International in 2000 because employees can play in the company gym on their lunch hours. He made such good use of the court that he set Guinness world records there in 2009 for the most blindfolded free throws made in one minute (16) and the most unassisted free throws made in two minutes (64).

He also scaled the corporate ladder, most recently taking charge of basketball and tennis products for the sneaker and apparel giant. But he worked at the grassroots level along the way and learned about the unmet challenges in the inner city.

“I saw a lot of kids who needed mentoring,” Justin said, “but I didn’t see a lot of it going on.”

Shooting Touch’s early years were dedicated to running clinics and providing academic incentives through a Gear 4 Grades program for urban high school athletes. (The boys’ basketball team at Boston’s New Mission High School was among the first recipients.)

Then the Kittredges dreamed bigger, designing a sabbatical program similar in spirit to the NBA’s Basketball Without Borders. Through Shooting Touch, they grant graduating college seniors \$25,000 for independent study programs, including travel expenses, anywhere on the planet. The traveling ambassadors are free to design their own journeys and programs so long as they use basketball to promote social change.

Enter Barros. With two days to go last year before the Kittredges closed their first application process, Barros contacted them with an urgent appeal. A senior at Hampton University in Virginia, he had been tipped off about the sabbatical by a cousin who was helping Shooting Touch produce a promotional video.

“Tome came in and blew us away,” Lindsey said. “A lot of applicants talked about using basketball to escape from the streets, but in Tome’s case it seemed a lot more real.”

Barros told of avoiding the bloodshed by exercising extreme caution and deft street diplomacy. He found safe havens at schools — St. Patrick in Roxbury through eighth grade, then BC High. And while some friends aligned with gangs, Barros found refuge on the basketball court at the Boys & Girls Club of Dorchester — the same court where mentors once helped a troubled kid named Mark Wahlberg turn his life around. (The club was recently featured in a “60 Minutes” segment on Wahlberg.)

Barros quickly established himself as one of the club’s stars. He immersed himself in basketball, community service, and the Keystone Club leadership program, and in 2004 received the center’s top honor as Youth of the Year.

“Tome came here to be safe from the streets, but he evolved into a leader and made a profound impact on his peers,” said Mike Joyce, the club’s vice president for programming, who has mentored youths there since 1979. “He’s one of the finest kids we’ve had.”

Barros grew up in the club with Edson Cardoso, who is widely respected in the Cape Verdean community as a teacher and the boys’ basketball coach at Charlestown High School.

“Tome and I went through the same struggles,” Cardoso said. “He has grown up to be a very passionate and positive leader. He’s really going to make an impact when he gets home.”

The journey continues Barros already has made a difference overseas. In Senegal, he restored dilapidated basketball courts, organized clinics, and taught impoverished children about leadership, the value of education, and AIDS prevention. He befriended strangers who gave him places to live. He also learned enough French and Portuguese — he already knew Cape Verdean Creole — to communicate in Senegal, then Brazil, the second stop on his mission, and the most jarring.

As bleak as life seemed for many children in Africa, nothing prepared Barros for the desperate poverty in the sprawling shanty towns of Rio de Janeiro. Soon after he arrived in October, government forces cracked down on drug gangs in advance of the 2016 Olympic Games. Dozens were killed, and heavily armed troops continue to patrol the slums.

Amid the danger, Barros reached out to scores of homeless and hungry children, some of whom followed him after his clinics in the hope he would house and feed them.

“The best thing was, I was able to give them the experience of feeling like kids again,” Barros said. “I felt like I was making a difference every single day.”

Barros has tried to ensure his legacy continues overseas by mentoring young adults in each country to carry on his work.

He already has established a nonprofit, Basketball Outreach Unifying Neighborhood Communities Everywhere (BOUNCE), to fund his efforts to use basketball as a way to guide high-risk youths in Dorchester toward peace and prosperity through educational programs.

Shooting Touch measures the success of its sabbatical ambassadors by monitoring their personal development and requiring them to chronicle the impact they make on each step of their journeys.

Now he is back to his family’s roots in Cape Verde, mentoring children too young to grasp the depth of their poverty.

“When I see them, I see myself as a child,” Barros said. “I realize I would be one of them if my parents hadn’t strived to go to America and find better opportunities for us.”

He tells the Cape Verdean children anything is possible if they get their educations — a message he plans to make a cornerstone of his campaign back home.

His journey, he said, has primed him for the challenge.

“I’ve changed countless lives and learned how to change many more,” Barros said. “It’s been a dream come true.”

The dream could help him shape a better Boston.

Bob Hohler can be reached at hohler@globe.com.

© Copyright 2011 Globe Newspaper Company.