STORY OF IMPACT
JACKIE HOFFMAN RUNS THE WEST SIDE

"It just kind of hit me. This is my purpose."

Jackie Hoffman was born and raised in West Garfield Park on the West Side of Chicago. He headed south for college on a football scholarship at Bethune-Cookman University, an HBCU in Florida. After graduating, he played football professionally, including in the Arena Football League – and even did a workout with the Chicago Bears. But he was living in Atlanta when he got the call to come home. His grandma was in the hospital and not doing well.

It was 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Jackie packed up his things and headed back to West Garfield Park to be with his grandma before she passed. It was during the same year that he found his purpose – and started the nonprofit Peace Runners 773.

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>
> **JACKIE HOFFMAN**
> **CEO & Founder,** Peace Runners 773

His mom was his inspiration. "Momma Hoffman" had been diagnosed with high blood pressure and obesity and was on 13 medications at age 62. Her doctor warned her that the average life expectancy of West Garfield Park residents was just 68 years – 20 years less than some affluent neighborhoods in Chicago.

Determined not to become a statistic, Jackie and his mom started walking together. A one-mile walk turned into a one-mile run. Momma Hoffman began to lose weight and build endurance. Her doctor's visits were reduced from every two months to twice a year. Today, she is on zero medication.

"My mom took action, and she changed her life," Jackie said. "Helping her during this time, it pushed me to become a leader, and I thought, if I can help her, how many more people can I help? I had to do more. That's how Peace Runners began."

What started with a single 5k in Garfield Park has now expanded to three robust programs that promote health equity and a safe and inclusive environment for movement. New and experienced runners train through the Out West Run program, which includes weekly runs, yoga, strength training, and workshops on nutrition and mental health. Momma Hoffman helps lead Young at Hearts, promoting health and wellness for seniors with group walks six days a week, plus fitness classes like Zumba, cardio kickboxing, Pilates, and yoga. And younger runners join the Youth Run Club, instilling life skills and the importance of physical, mental, and social health.

All these programs get people moving – and building community in Garfield Park. "People don't run the West Side," Jackie said. "I started running and people saw me and were like 'Bro, you run every day.' This created

access for everyone else to run. Now, Peace Runners has brought a real solid sense of community. People cheer us on when they see us running."

Under Jackie's leadership, Peace Runners 773 continues to grow, making running accessible for more people. In 2024, 87 runners participated in the Chicago Half Marathon through Peace Runners. Forty-one ran the Chicago Marathon – 23 were first-time marathoners. "Our participation in the marathon was bigger than I ever envisioned," Jackie said. "We had representation of Black and Brown people in that space and created opportunity."

Peace Runners 773 continues to expand through more partnerships and funding, including United Way of Metro Chicago's Chicago BridgeBuilders Fund. Peace Runners is a part of the third cohort, along with eight other small community-based nonprofits on the South and West Sides of Chicago and in the south suburbs.

The Chicago BridgeBuilders Fund provides up to $50,000 in unrestricted funds, plus networking and capacity building with industry professionals. Being a part of the Fund's third cohort has helped Jackie grow, personally and professionally – and take Peace Runners to the next level.

"As a grassroots leader, you're spearheading every role, but who's teaching you about administrative work, evaluations, and fundraising?" Jackie said. "[United Way's support] has helped Peace Runners create new roles and responsibilities – a chief operating officer, community engagement, and coaches. This gives me space to grow. I credit a lot of that to United Way for helping me create access and giving me tools so I can be a better executive director and leader."

Like his runners, Jackie believes in the power of resilience, something that drives him as an influential coach and leader.

"Running teaches people about resiliency. There are no limitations," Jackie said. "A lot of people would have never run a marathon if it wasn't for Peace Runners. They didn't think it was possible, and now they believe in themselves. They believe they can do more. They believe they can do anything in life."

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