

# THE ACADEMY THAT GIVES

## SECOND CHANCES FOR PEOPLE TO LIVE

### MEETING MICHAEL MENDAZA

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*We sat down and looked into the name 'second chance'. We thought: I am a former refugee in Nottingham, I was given a second chance for me to be here and live. Otherwise if I wasn't given that I wouldn't be here.* ”



I had the pleasure of meeting Michael Mendaza, a former topflight footballer originally from Zimbabwe who settled in Nottingham just short of nineteen years ago. Mendaza founded what is now the Second Chance Academy, an organization that helps children from the ages of five to thirteen with their football skills. However after speaking with Michael he revealed that the academy is much more than that. The system doesn't just teach children the sport of football; it teaches 'them to kick a ball, to head a ball, how to shake hands, how to say sorry, how to be polite.' It became apparent to me that while the academy began through Michael's love of football, throughout time, it became 'a community project where we teach how to live with each other, how to accommodate each other and how to help each other. It's not just about football anymore, but it's how to teach the kids how to survive.'

I was fascinated when Michael told us the tale of how the Second Change Academy all began. Football has been a huge influence on Michael but so has the world of law enforcement. When he came to live in Nottingham, he worked as both a police and probation officer, and in this role, was a first-hand witness to the high crime rates present in the city. During this time, Michael realised the young offenders all had something in common: the love of football, and felt that giving them an outlet for this interest would be a way to help them focus, turn their lives around and keep them out of crime. Since then, the Academy has become an outlet for anyone who needs a second or indeed first chance in life – who needs the discipline and camaraderie of sport in their life. Michael's own passion for the game led him to build the foundations of the Second Chance Academy, along with friends and colleagues Musandide Harris Chinguwo, Sindandi Mkhweli and Balewa Mwalwanda. Since then, the organisation has gone from strength to strength.

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*What is a refugee person? People say refugee, but people forget I'm just human. A refugee is a human. I am a law abiding citizen. I'm a British citizen. But to start with I was a refugee.* ”

The academy now has plans to expand the league further. There have also been success stories from the scheme with some participants having trials and playing for one of Nottingham's huge football clubs, Notts County F.C, and for Darlington F.C. Despite the success of the organization, it has had to face difficulties during its time – particularly as funding can be hard to come by. But Michael and his colleagues' passion and drive keeps everything flowing.

The fundamental reason why I met with Michael was to discuss the activities he has planned for Nottingham Refugee Week in June 2021: a week full of arts, dance, literature, music and much more, all to celebrate the cultural diversities amongst the city of Nottingham.

He is planning on arranging a World Cup tournament for kids and adults from many different backgrounds, who will each represent a different culture. On the pitch, the teams being able to play alongside one another will create a wonderful way to showcase Nottingham's cultural diversity, and how all of us across communities can work and play together. It is highly appropriate that Michael should create this tournament in a city which is so famous for the sport with the oldest football club, Notts County and Nottingham Forest who went on to win two European cups.

When meeting with Michael Mendaza, he made one particular statement that really struck me. Speaking of his own background and how it has influenced his desire to give others second chances, he said: 'what is a refugee person? People say refugee, but people forget I'm just human. A refugee is a human'. For Michael, being able to settle in Nottingham was his second chance and for that he wants to give other people that same chance. People who as Michael says 'start with being refugees' are just human. This is why events such as the one Michael is planning for Refugee Week are so significant – as they allow people to connect with one another as human beings. As Michael says, the real formula is 'gelling with your community' - not just for those who were once refugees but for those of us who are lucky enough to call Nottingham our home already. As fellow humans we need to learn from, love and live with one another, and Second Chance Academy helps us do that.

Look out for the World Cup Tournament in Refugee Week 2021.

**Paige Robson**

