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## NBA, partners renovate Miami Springs community center

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CARL JUSTE / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Jasmin Romay, 10, gets a high five from Heat player Juwan Howard, center, during a game of Connect Four as Alexa, 7, and brother Xavier Garcia, 11, right, look on. NBA and Miami Heat executives along with local politicians attended the opening ceremony of the NBA Learning Place ribbon cutting at Miami Springs Community Center Monday, June 18, 2012.

Teenagers and toddlers wearing gray, oversized T-shirts joined Miami Heat players and other dignitaries for the grand opening of the Heat's latest community center to celebrate the team entering the Finals.

Every year during the championship games, NBA Cares—the athletic association's community outreach branch—joins with sponsors to perform a project in the participating teams' respective cities.

Last week, NBA Cares and its partners State Farm Insurance and Hewlett Packard were in Oklahoma City to renovate a rescue mission.

On Monday, it was South Florida's turn. The team picked the Miami Springs Community

Center for a new NBA Cares Learn & Play Center.

"It's with great excitement that I'm here," said Heat player James Jones, who grew up in South Florida. "This will hopefully be one more center that will help children fulfill their dreams and reach their potential."

After the Heat defeated the Celtics on June 9 and proceeded to the Finals, the team began looking for a community site that could use a helping hand, said Ralph Leon, director of community relations for the Miami Heat.

Barely two weeks ago, the walls of the Miami Springs Community Center were drab and it didn't have books or computers.

After a speedy renovation, the center became one of 711 centers the NBA has created in 23 countries.

The Heat's 10th Learn & Play center in South Florida reopened with 13 new computers and a library of its own. The walls, now painted in the team's dark red colors, have pictures

of current players. Basketball bean-bag chairs line a new big screen TV plugged with video games.

"This is what giving to the community is all about," said Jose Soto, public affairs specialist for State Farm.

"It's better than the old rec center," said Alissa Baan, 9, playing Hungry Hungry Hippos with Gwendolyn Odin, 8. Both were from Miami Springs. "It has the Heat and I love the Heat players," Alissa said.

David Namen, 11, and Quinn Korman, 15, both of Miami Springs, challenged Ron Johnson, NBA senior vice president of referee operations, and Heat player Eddy Curry to a game of foosball. Across the room, Miami Springs Mayor Xavier Garcia played Connect Four with a few kids.

The Learn & Play Center is free and open to all Miami-Dade residents, Garcia said. Miami Springs is within easy access of Hialeah, Doral, the Village of Virginia Gardens and Miami.

Even though the Learn & Play center targets mostly young people, Garcia said senior citizens also will be able to benefit from it, adding that the community center soon will offer computer classes geared towards the elderly.

Heat player Juwan Howard said he wished he had a similar space when he was growing up. He promised to come back soon to visit with teammates who frequently volunteer at the center.

Omar Luna, the center's recreation director, appreciates their volunteer work. The center sees about 150 kids a day, he said.

"What better place to mentor our kids than a place with pictures of our athletes that our kids look up to?" he asked.

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