

# Stephen and Ayesha Curry Tell Us About the Future of Their Philanthropy

Ade Adeniji | September 07, 2023



STEPHEN AND AYESHA CURRY. COURTESY OF EAT. LEARN. PLAY./NOAH GRAHAM FOR GETTY.

I've been covering the philanthropy of NBA superstar and sharpshooter Stephen Curry since 2019, when he and his wife Ayesha launched their [Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation \(ELP\)](#). At 35, the legendary Golden State Warriors point guard is still in the earliest stages of his giving. But with an estimated \$160 million net worth and a spot on *Forbes'* 2023 list of world's highest-paid athletes, Stephen Curry is already charting out a path of giving through ELP and beyond — and he's doing so alongside Ayesha Curry, a cookbook author and television host with over 8 million followers on Instagram.

To get a handle on the Currys' giving through the years, I've spoken to [ELP's CEO Chris Helfrich](#) and other figures in the couple's orbit.

But now, I got to speak with Stephen and Ayesha themselves, which, as a lifelong hoops player and fan, had me wondering if I should go re-create his 32-foot [game-winner in overtime against OKC](#) back in 2016 — or simply take a deep breath and a cold shower in preparation.

It's a good time to be diving back into the Currys' philanthropy. This week, the Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation announced an enhanced commitment to ensuring that all Oakland Unified School District

students are provided the nutritious meals they need to thrive, support to become stronger readers, and great schoolyards and opportunities to be active and participate in youth sports. The Currys intend to raise and invest \$50 million in additional support and resources for OUSD students by the 2026 school year — consistent with the couple's three-pronged focus on healthy food, education, and youth recreation and sports in the Bay Area.

On our Zoom call, I spoke to the Currys about their renewed partnership with Oakland Unified, their focus on empowering youth in their adopted city, how they've courted the support of major companies and business figures (including tech billionaire Aneel Bhusri), and where they see their philanthropy going next.

## A sharpshooter becomes a philanthropist

Some of Stephen Curry's earliest experiences with philanthropy didn't happen in the Bay Area, but abroad. He traveled to Tanzania with the United Nations Foundation's Nothing But Nets campaign, having been recruited by Chris Helfich, then director of Nothing But Nets. The Currys and Helfich visited the Nyarugusu refugee camp in northwestern Tanzania to deliver life-saving antimalaria bed nets to residents. Stephen Curry saw the experiences of residents firsthand, their struggles hammered home by a chart that detailed monthly statistics at a health facility in a region where malaria is often fatal.

The Currys' organized giving, however, has taken on a more local focus. When the Currys started their foundation in the summer of 2019, Stephen Curry says he was motivated to make an impact in his adopted home of Oakland, where he has played with the Golden State Warriors for his entire career. While it's true that the club now plays across the bay in San Francisco's Chase Arena, the story of Oakland still looms large for the couple. And the Currys have remained faithful to the city to which Stephen has brought four NBA championships since 2015. "We've been able to activate the community in an extremely impactful way and ally with some amazing organizations, individuals and companies that are very like-minded and have the opportunity to impact the City of Oakland, our adopted home," Curry told me.

Recently celebrating ELP's four-year anniversary, the baller is particularly proud of the range of projects the couple has worked on to empower children, whether it was stepping up during the acute phase of the pandemic with meal distributions, or refurbishing playgrounds so that kids have a safe space to play. To date, Eat. Learn. Play. has raised more than \$47 million to serve Oakland kids and families. It's delivered more than 25 million meals, invested \$6 million in literacy resources and support, and revitalized 12 school and community playspaces, among other efforts.

Though ELP is a public foundation that pulls in money through fundraising, the Currys donate a seven-figure sum annually to cover 100% of its administrative and fundraising costs. And a spokesperson confirmed that the Currys



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remain Eat. Learn. Play.'s largest annual contributors. But after four years, Curry also talks about being motivated to take the work to the next level, which brought him to the Oakland Unified School District.

"This is where 35,000 students go to eat, learn and play every single day," he said. "And when you have the opportunity to amplify and support systems that are already in place, then we can scale our work and bring it to another level on top of a capital contribution."

### Keying in on Oakland Unified and courting powerful partners

While around 47% of students across the state of California are proficient in reading, just 36% of Oakland students are, according to 2023 data collected across [Oakland's public schools](#). The Currys aim to change these numbers. Ayesha believes that remaining focused on the foundation's three core pillars — healthy food, education and youth recreation — will help move the needle. "In the beginning, we realized that when these kids have access to these three simple things, the entire trajectory of their life looks very different. So the focus really is all on kids, from that kindergarten through middle school age, because that really determines everything else," Ayesha Curry said.

Eat. Learn. Play.'s new commitment to support Oakland Unified targets those three priorities, and its efforts will include working with OUSD's Central Kitchen, Education Center and Instructional Garden & Farm, which aims to provide over 6 million healthy and fresh school meals annually to nearly 35,000 students across 85 schools.

In pursuing its aims, ELP works with a variety of program partners: Alameda County Community Food Bank, Oakland Literacy Coalition, Reading Partners, East Oakland Youth Development Center and Black Cultural Zone, a coalition of residents, government agencies, churches and grassroots organizing and community groups empowering Black Americans in East Oakland.

Eat. Learn. Play. has also been able to court some serious fellow players from business and philanthropy including Kaiser Permanente, Chase, Tom Steyer and Kate Taylor's [TomKat Foundation](#), [Bloomberg Philanthropies](#) and Workday.

When it comes to the philanthropy of athletes and celebrities, we need to remember that it's not only about the funds they can contribute to a cause, but their star power — galvanizing fans to rally around a cause, as well as business figures and corporations. And for Stephen Curry, that means tapping some serious heavyweights from Silicon Valley, some of whom have no doubt been captivated by the player's wizardry sitting courtside for the past 14 years. Curry himself runs Penny Jar Capital, an early stage venture capital firm.

One of those enthusiastic backers is Aneel Bhusri, the billionaire co-founder and CEO of Workday, the system software company headquartered in Pleasanton, California. Bhusri was one of the first supporters of Eat. Learn. Play. and of the Curry family's early philanthropic vision.

Bhusri says he and Curry first met on a golf course. "As you know, he's an excellent golfer. I play golf, but not like he does," Bhusri said with a laugh. The billionaire met Ayesha Curry not too long after and was inspired by the couple's vision. "As iconic as Steph and Ayesha are, they're even better human beings."

Bhusri's early days in tech had him working for PeopleSoft in the East Bay, so he considers Oakland his back yard and resonated with the Currys' work to empower young people and their communities. [Aneel and Allison Bhusri](#), worth \$2.9 billion, focus on education, youth and the Bay Area community in their giving. The [Workday Foundation](#), meanwhile, aims to "create meaningful employment, break the cycle of poverty, and transform lives." Bhusri supports ELP through the Workday Charity Classic, which he estimates has raised about \$6 million to date.

"The most fun is these playgrounds we've done together," Bhusri said. "It's amazing. Everyone's crying. The parents are crying. I'm crying. Workday employees are crying. It's just really powerful."

### The next chapter

With four NBA championships, one finals MVP, two league MVPs and nine NBA all-star selections under his belt, Stephen Curry's place among basketball royalty is already secure. But the couple are only in their mid-30s, and their philanthropic story is just getting started. When I asked the Currys if they were ready to take their model beyond Oakland, Ayesha was quick to make it clear that there's still plenty of work left to do there. "For us, I think it's really, really important to make sure what we set out to do here is complete in the sense of a fully running, fully functional, efficient system. And I think when we start seeing those demographics, and those numbers change is when we can think about that," she said.

The next step Ayesha's keen on pursuing through her platform — remember those 8 million Instagram followers? — is advocating for policy change. In 2021, for instance, through No Kid Hungry, an organization she's been involved with for years, she gave a virtual testimony in front of the House Rules Committee. Ayesha also plans on continuing to focus in on the "eat" pillar of Eat. Learn. Play. "I think that's important for myself and where I hope to make the most change," she said.

Stephen Curry, meanwhile, emphasized that 99% of the couple's work remains focused in the Bay Area. Still, he wants to continue to find partners to empower their philanthropy. ELP did do a golf fundraising tournament in Curry's home state of Ohio, which sparked new ideas for him. "You start to kind of slowly spread your wings as far as finding similarities in different pockets of the country. But you have to prove the model here first," he said.

And true to the Bay Area's DNA as a tech hub, Stephen Curry also talks in terms of being strategic and metrics-based in his philanthropy going forward. "We're trying to make it as research and data-driven as possible in [the] sense of how we allocate resources that we have," he said. And he's resolved to keep a philanthropic bullseye on Oakland. "If we can be a huge part in changing those stats, and changing the opportunity for kids to reach their full potential,

however long that timeline is, that's where you can really deepen the roots of making this a generational change. And that's a big deal.”

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