

## Believe in Their Dreams

An Interview with Jelena Djokovic, Co-Founder and Global CEO, Novak Djokovic Foundation

**EDITORS' NOTE** Jelena Djokovic was born and raised in Belgrade, Serbia. She studied in Italy and then moved to Monaco where she has lived for the past 12 years. She runs the Novak Djokovic Foundation that is focused on empowering families and future leaders of society by investing in quality early childhood education and development, which covers the period between the birth of a child all the way to 8 years of age. In order to support the development



Jelena Djokovic

of kids during this stage of life, Djokovic and her team are opening and renovating kindergartens and outdoor spaces, training teachers, buying materials for working with children, organizing support groups for parents, and investing in research and studies of this particular stage of development. The majority of the Foundation's work is focused in Serbia, but it has supported many different organizations worldwide including in Australia, Miami, Croatia, and Bosnia.

**Will you highlight the history of the Novak Djokovic Foundation and how you define its mission?**

Novak and I grew up in a war-torn country in difficult circumstances. However, we were fortunate to grow up in families that nurtured education and understood the value of early childhood development. For us, it was only natural that we do the same through the work of our Foundation. To do that, we gathered a team of truly passionate people who believe that every child should have a chance to grow up in a nurturing and loving environment where he or she will thrive and flourish.



Novak Djokovic painting with children at Friendship Games on Kopaonik mountain in 2019

***“Belief is the most universal word to me,  
even more than hope. For one to achieve his  
dreams, he needs to truly believe in them.”***

**Novak Djokovic**

Our organization was founded in 2007 with a simple goal: to help. Nevertheless, it wasn't until 2012 that we switched our mission to early childhood development (ECD) and education. Today, our mission remains the same: change the world by investing in the early years. While supporting and working closely with children, parents, caregivers, and educators through investments, advocacy, empowerment, and promotion of our values, we are reshaping today's system – and consequently – the future of the entire society.

**Will you discuss the decision for the Foundation to focus its efforts on early childhood education?**

A significant milestone that led us to define ECD as the focus of our mission took place in 2012 after our country faced a rather worrying statistic provided by UNICEF which showed that half of the children in Serbia did not attend preschool programs. Low preschool participation rates such as these represent alarming data for the future of any society because studies show that children who do not attend preschool face higher chances of dropping out of school, living lives of poverty and crime, and would have to be rehabilitated into the society.

Novak and I find this topic very personal because, above everything else, we believe in prevention through investing in early years programs rather than later rehabilitation of these children.

**Will you provide an overview of the work of the Foundation and its initiatives?**

We believe in making long-term investments and working side-by-side with the communities we invest in, so that our schools and programs are sustainable and will help generations to come. We systematically divide our work into independent, yet interconnected, programmatic pillars: School Builds, Teacher Training, Parent Support, Child Development, The Original, and Emergency Response.

Through School Builds, we build preschools or adapt places to become preschools with the goal to ensure more children have access to quality preschool education. We provide new toys, books, didactic equipment, and all the necessary

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*Building a solid foundation for the future: Jelena Djokovic at the opening of School of Life in Kukujevcu in 2016*



*Novak Djokovic at the opening of School of Life in Macvanski Prnjavor in 2019*

materials for everyday learning and playing. Components of School Builds are Adaptations, New Builds, Schools of Life, Playgrounds, and Study Rooms within the Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care project (ECEC).

When we invest in the refurbishment or construction of a preschool, we know it is equally important to invest in the teachers who will run them. Therefore, we continue to work with teachers, holding seminars that aim to educate and empower them. We connect staff to prominent leaders in the field of education and give them high-quality academic literature geared towards enhancing their teaching methods as well as advancing their own careers as educators.

Empowering parents is a crucial component of our mission. With them in mind, we have created two programs to support them on their journey: Support, Not Perfection and The Path of a Champion. These programs are supported by like-minded international organizations and recognized by renowned scientific journals. Since the start of the pandemic, we have moved into the digital realm where we host webinars on topics relevant for parenting.

Through focused field research, we pinpoint aspects of development where children struggle and aim to develop. We implement programs supporting their growth such as social-emotional development, nutrition, and physical development. Our Child Development programs are ABC of Better Me, Friendship Games, Feel to Heal, MindUp, and New Year Support. Every year, we also celebrate the International Day of Sport for Development and Peace.

The Original is a platform I am particularly proud of. I created it with the intention to empower brave, creative, and strong individuals, future leaders, and decision-makers, to support young entrepreneurs and promote positive examples of accomplished businesspeople,

and, by doing so, to enrich the community with new knowledge. The Original consists of five components: Original talks; Dare to be original; Original voice; The school of entrepreneurship; and Masterclasses.

During unprecedented events, we feel it is our duty to help and act beyond the scope of our regular projects. For instance, thanks to our efforts after the great floods that devastated our country in 2014, many preschools that were severely damaged were reconstructed and our youngest were able to return and continue with their education.



*The winning team: Jelena Djokovic with children*

Moreover, having recognized the severity of the health situation after the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, the Foundation was ready to help once again by providing support to Serbia's health system.

**How did the Foundation adapt the way it works to address the challenges caused by the global pandemic?**

The whole world seemed to stop in the wake of this pandemic. We too had to push pause on most of our in-person and infrastructure work due to mandatory social distancing. But, in order to continue to provide support and help to our stakeholders, we knew we needed to adapt.

Our focus turned to digitizing our programs and transforming our usual in-person workshops, lessons, and training, into online education. In doing so, we were able to reach many children and parents, and in turn, this inspired the idea of "opening" our own Online Academy, a project that we hope to roll out very soon.

In addition to this, Novak and I felt the need to help our country in battling COVID-19. We did so by donating one million Euros through our Foundation in support of Serbia's healthcare system. We were humbled when so many of our corporate partners and donors joined in, with over \$200,000 worth of donations. Thanks to this joint action, we were able to help 25 healthcare institutions in Serbia. Our entire team worked hard to ensure that the equipment needed by hospitals arrived as soon as possible, that it was of premium quality, and that it fulfilled the needs of the healthcare system.

**How critical are metrics to measure the impact of the Foundation's work?**

When we started our work in 2007, we were overeager to help as many people and children as we could. Unfortunately, not having a clear mission and goal didn't help in our efforts and we realized we couldn't measure our impact

precisely. This, of course, changed in 2012. Due to Novak's role as a UNICEF Ambassador, we found out that every second child in Serbia doesn't get to attend preschool; that over 2500 locations were without any infrastructure to help the matter; and that the situation in rural Serbia had even more dire statistics than the national average. This shook us to our core and inspired us to adapt our approach, focus our mission, and set tentative goals that we believed were possible to achieve – something we strive for to this day. Metrics are critical to the work of any nonprofit and ours does not differ in this regard. We all carry the responsibility towards our donors and stakeholders to be as transparent as possible so that they understand where their money is going, how it is being used, and what impact it has.

We have been nurturing this kind of relationship, based on mutual trust and transparent communication, from the very beginning. Our results are best seen in the number of children helped; playgrounds opened; study rooms furnished; preschools built, adapted, and reconstructed; programs and projects initiated and completed; charity dinners organized; funds collected; partnerships secured; individual and corporate donors acquired; and the number of countries they come from.

**Will you discuss Novak's passion and commitment for the work of the Foundation and how deeply engaged he is in its efforts?**

Novak has always been very passionate and committed to the idea of giving back and helping younger generations. This is something he is dedicated to on and off the court. He always stresses how lucky he was to have the care, love, and support from an early age from his family, and how much their belief in him and his dreams meant to his success. This is why now, through our Foundation, he is able to do just that: provide this support system so that other children like him can dare to dream.



*Jelena Djokovic and a little girl reading a book at a kindergarten opening*

Of course, when his tennis schedule allows for some time off, he is the first one to come and support our work, the team, to greet our partners and donors, listen to the problems we wish to solve, and offer his ideas and suggestions – but his favorite activity is playtime with the children we help.

**Novak Djokovic Foundation is celebrating its 15th Anniversary. Will you take moments to reflect and celebrate the accomplishments of the Foundation over the past 15 years?**

We have come a long way. When our work started, every second child in Serbia attended preschool. In rural areas, these numbers were even more striking – one in every four children. This meant they had to stay home with their parents or grandparents, without options to play and learn with their peers, and this, in turn, debilitated their start in life.

Ten years since we changed our mission and 15 since we founded the Foundation, we have helped more than 50,000 children through our comprehensive programs and projects. We have also trained more than 2,200 teachers, empowered 8,000 parents, built 11 playgrounds, and opened 52 preschools across Serbia. In just over a year, we have also opened 106 study rooms within the ECEC project, thus helping more than 2,700 children go to preschool. All these results were made possible thanks to the generosity of more than 200 organizations and 5,000 individual donors from 75 countries which share our values and beliefs.

Together, we have invested over \$15 million, thus contributing to the improvement of the lives of entire communities, encouraging them to stay in their hometowns and plan their future there, instead of moving to larger cities or abroad.

**What are your priorities for the Novak Djokovic Foundation as you look to the future?**

Our main goal remains the same: to enable more than 90 percent of children in Serbia to attend preschool by 2030. So far, we have made significant progress in that regard and, with the increased institutional support and recognition we are getting as our Foundation is growing, we are on the right track to keep giving children a chance to prosper, to know the joy of success, and to believe that they are worthy of their dreams. ●



*Novak and Jelena Djokovic remain steadfast in their mission to help more than 90 percent of children in Serbia to preschool education by 2030*