

# Building a Foundation for Children to Prosper in Life

An Interview with Chris Helfrich, Chief Executive Officer, Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation

**EDITORS' NOTE** Chris Helfrich is a social entrepreneur and nonprofit leader committed to finding innovative solutions to community-based issues and problems. Currently, he is President and CEO of Stephen and Ayesha Curry's Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation (ELP), which he helped launch in July 2019. To date, Helfrich has expanded the foundation to include over 30+ community partnerships including Kaiser Permanente, Workday, Salesforce, World Central Kitchen, and the Alameda County Community Food Bank. Additionally, he has played an instrumental role in facilitating the delivery of over 25 million meals to Oakland students and families struggling with food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to this, Helfrich served as CEO of the Starlight Children's Foundation, the nation's leading organization working to transform the hospital experience for millions of seriously and terminally ill children across the U.S. Before joining Starlight, he worked for the United Nations Foundation, where he spent over five years leading Nothing But Nets, the world's largest global, grassroots campaign to defeat malaria. While leading Nothing But Nets, Helfrich recruited Stephen Curry to become an ambassador for the campaign, and the two traveled together to refugee camps in Tanzania in 2013 and the White House in 2014 in support of the fight to defeat malaria. He is a member of the Board of Directors for Starlight Children's Foundation and the Leadership Council for Classic. Helfrich is a graduate of Trinity University where he was named Young Alumnus of the Year in 2018.



Chris Helfrich

*Oakland has access to the nutritious food they need to be healthy and thrive; resources to learn and love to read; and safe places and equitable opportunities to play. The organization, which is anchored around the message that children are our future, is committed to developing partnerships and initiatives that make a positive impact for generations to come.*

**What was the vision for creating Eat. Learn. Play. and how do you define its mission?**

Alongside Stephen and Ayesha Curry, we launched Eat. Learn. Play. in Oakland, California in 2019. Stephen and Ayesha saw the tremendous need that exists all around us and wanted to do what they can to help improve the lives of kids and families in Oakland, the Bay Area, and across the country, and do so in a way that leveraged not just their funds, but also their unique and powerful voices, platforms, and convening powers in order to have maximum impact. With a bold mission to unlock the amazing

potential of every child and improve the lives of kids and families of color in the area, our programming efforts are rooted in three of the most vital pillars for a healthy childhood: nutrition, education, and physical activity.

**Will you provide an overview of the work of Eat. Learn. Play. and highlight its initiatives?**

Eat. Learn. Play.'s work is driven by impact. In just three years, we have raised and invested more than \$32 million and developed a powerful model that directly supports underserved children and families in the areas they need it most. In addition to the traditional grantmaking we do, our initiatives come to life in creative and innovative ways – from partnering with 130 local restaurants to feed the community at the height of the pandemic, to launching our Eat. Learn. Play. Bus to deliver books and nutritious food and meals throughout our community, to building and maintaining 150 Little Town Libraries in under-resourced parts of Oakland in an effort to ignite a culture of literacy in our hometown.

**FOUNDATION BRIEF** Eat. Learn. Play. Foundation ([eatlearnplay.org](http://eatlearnplay.org)) is an organization dedicated to unleashing the potential of every child, paving the way for amazing kids and opening doors to bright futures. Founded by Stephen and Ayesha Curry in 2019, Eat. Learn. Play. launched in San Francisco with a focus on improving the lives of kids and families in Oakland, the Bay Area, and across the country. Rooted in three of the most vital pillars for a healthy childhood – nutrition, education, and physical activity – Eat. Learn. Play. is working to ensure that every child in



Stephen Curry rounds the bases at Eat. Learn. Play. Day at the Oakland Coliseum





*Stephen and Ayesha Curry install the first Eat. Learn. Play. Little Town Library*

**Will you discuss how Eat. Learn. Play. focuses on the three vital pillars of a healthy childhood?**

Eat. Learn. Play.'s work is centered on three vital pillars that promote a healthy childhood: nutrition (eat), education (learn), and physical activity (play). As an organization, we are committed to developing and supporting programming that directly tackles these issue areas with initiatives that ensure children and families in need have access to nutritious food to be healthy and thrive in life; resources to help kids become better readers; and safe places and equitable opportunities to play in their community. One aspect that is so important to understand about our pillars is how interconnected they are in working together to build a foundation for children to prosper in life.

**How did Eat. Learn. Play. adapt the way it works to address the challenges caused by the pandemic?**

At the heart of Eat. Learn. Play.'s mission is the goal of ending childhood hunger and broadening our reach to impact the lives of children everywhere. This is something that Ayesha has been working on for a decade and has continued through the foundation. Eat. Learn. Play. was only six months old when the pandemic hit, but we were prepared on day one to mobilize all of our resources to help make sure no Oakland student would miss a meal when schools announced they were closing indefinitely – in 2020, roughly 18,000 students relied on school for two or more meals every day. Through strategic partnerships with other organizations on the ground, as food insecurity continued to grow, we brought our villages together and successfully helped facilitate the distribution of over 25 million meals and 2.7 million pounds of fresh produce to kids and families in our community. Still today, more

than 13 million kids are living with hunger in our country, as 37 percent of Oakland kids live in food insecure households, so we still have so much work to do at all levels to make sure every child has access to the food they need to thrive.

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

They are very important. We use metrics to help set goals and benchmarks at Eat. Learn. Play. and they're a large part of how we evaluate the impact we're having through our various programs and community partnerships. We know we're still young as a foundation and have a lot to learn about the best ways to maximize our impact, and we believe in the power of taking small steps forward in achieving our collective mission.

While the numbers and data tell part of our story, what's important to remember is that there is so much more to what we are doing beyond the metrics that quantify our work. It's hard to quantify the impact that Stephen makes when he spends an afternoon reading and playing with a small group of kids, or when Ayesha hand delivers thousands of beautiful new books to kids and families alongside our first-of-its-kind Eat. Learn. Play. Bus. But you see it in their eyes and in their smiles, and while it can sometimes be difficult to measure, there's no doubt in those moments the difference we're making in the lives of so many kids in our community.

**Will you discuss Stephen and Ayesha's passion and commitment for the work of Eat. Learn. Play. and how deeply engaged they are in its efforts?**

Since the day we launched, Stephen and Ayesha have been the biggest champions of Eat. Learn. Play.'s mission and the work we do across our three pillars. Stephen and Ayesha were both raised under the idea that giving

back and taking care of the community is vitally important, and now with the resources and platform they have, they can do that in a big way. In addition to serving on our Board of Directors and being our biggest donors, they're constantly providing feedback and new ideas for expanding our impact, mobilizing their networks to bring awareness and additional funding to the organization, and using their voices and platforms to amplify our message and reach as many people as possible. However big or small the ask, the Currys always rise to the occasion and help in every way they can. To say that we're blessed to have them spearheading this effort is a massive understatement.

**Did you always know that you had a passion for this type of work and what makes the work so special for you?**

Since I was about 18 or 19, yes. Like the Currys, I was raised by parents who stressed the importance of serving others and giving back. I don't think anything has inspired my passion for service more than watching my parents adopt three teenagers from difficult situations and (almost) seamlessly integrating them as equal members of our family. The sacrifice they made was incredible, and they did it with so much grace and patience that I couldn't help but to be inspired by the extraordinary impact that ordinary people can make in the lives of others.

Throughout my career, I've always pursued opportunities with organizations that aim to make a positive impact in the lives of others and, ultimately, bring some more good into the world. As the CEO of Eat. Learn. Play., it's been incredibly special – and humbling – to watch our team grow over the past three years, from one, to three, to now 14 team members – all incredibly talented individuals who believe in our mission and share a passion and common ground for helping those in need. It's the role of a lifetime.

**What are your priorities for Eat. Learn. Play. as you look to the future?**

Growing our impact in Oakland across all three pillars is the most immediate priority for Eat. Learn. Play. We're regularly asked to expand our work into other communities but we're staying focused on Oakland until we get it right and can prove that our model works. This means doubling down on making sure kids have access to nutritious food, with an emphasis on helping our local Oakland school system launch a new Central Kitchen that promises to deliver more than 9 million quality meals every year. We are also prioritizing the literacy crisis and focusing on ways that we can help ignite a culture of literacy in Oakland, with a focus on dramatically increasing kindergarten readiness and third grade reading levels. And in 2023, we're planning to roll out a comprehensive "Play" strategy that focuses on ensuring all kids have access to safe places and opportunities to be active and participate in youth sports. This strategy will include remodeling lots of playspaces across our community, and making major investments in school and recreational sports programs, as well as increasing access to quality summer camps for Oakland kids. ●