

HC Roots: JJ Cooks

Growing up with a basketball coach father, basketball was always a part of JJ Cooks' identity. When JJ joined Hillside Connection in second grade, he felt like his natural intensity on the court was not just understood, but encouraged.

"One thing I gained from Hillside was being around a certain type of basketball culture," JJ says. "It's competitive, but it's also a good environment – a lively environment." JJ's coaches at Hillside Connection identified his competitiveness as an asset, one that motivated others to succeed and buoyed his team in hard moments.

Hillside's animated culture left a lasting impact. Playing in outdoor spaces like Memorial Park and competing alongside other driven athletes pushed JJ to become tougher, more confident, and more fearless on the court. This practice paid off in high school, where JJ played as a guard on his basketball team at Sand Creek High School.



For JJ's father, Jeff, one of the most meaningful aspects of the program is how it created an environment where JJ could truly be himself. "It allowed him to be in a culture where his personality is celebrated," Jeff says. "He got to experience basketball in a way that matched who he is."

Jeff is also grateful for Hillside Connection's impactful mentorship, where JJ looked up to young Black men who looked like him. His coaches role modeled responsibility, kindness, and determination – qualities that JJ himself now strives to emulate. "They showed me how to be a loyal person over time," JJ says. "Even now, they still check in and support me."

JJ is now focused on the future, planning on studying sports management at ____ in the fall. Grounded in the lessons he's learned – competitiveness, loyalty, and self-confidence – he's stepping into his next chapter with clarity and purpose.



HC Roots: Duane Donlin

Hillside Connection taught Duane Donlin to lead with character. Duane joined the program at age nine and remained involved through middle school, building relationships with coaches and mentors who emphasized respect, accountability, and a positive attitude.

“Off the court, the priority was to have a good attitude and be respectful,” Duane says.

Those lessons followed him into high school, where he played varsity basketball all four years as a point guard. As the team’s floor leader, he learned how to communicate, guide teammates, and take responsibility for the success of the group.



“Point guard means being a role model. You have to lead by example.”

In addition to basketball, Duane played soccer and track while balancing work and school. Through juggling multiple commitments, Duane learned discipline and time management, lessons that serve him to this day.

Duane’s father, Brendan, appreciates the community that supported Duane at a time of critical growth, citing Duane’s mentors at Hillside Connection as instrumental to his adolescent growth. “He was surrounded by such positive men,” Brendan says. “They really looked out for him.”

Duane will attend Colorado State University this fall to study business. Looking back, he credits Hillside Connection with helping him develop the leadership, respect, and work ethic that continue to guide him today.

For Duane, Hillside became more than a place to play basketball—it became a community that helped prepare him for life.



HC Roots: Gulong Craft

When Gulong Craft first joined Hillside Connection, he described himself as reserved. Communication didn't come easily, especially in high-pressure environments like team sports. But his coaches at Hillside emphasized something that would shape his ability to lead in the future: the importance of finding his voice.

"With coach Terrell, he's teaching you how to communicate, how to be hard working, and how to give effort no matter what," says Gulong.

Gulong started to speak up more, understanding the importance of communicating to fix problems on and off the court. This lesson proved to be essential in high school, where Gulong became a successful three-sport athlete.

He set state records all four years in track, started as point guard of Harrison High School's varsity basketball team his freshman year, and excelled in football. As he advanced as a player, younger teammates looked to Gulong for direction and advice.



"Being a leader means helping younger teammates understand what to do and what it takes," Gulong says. "Even if you're not used to speaking up, you have to."

Gulong's leadership and resilience took a different form his senior year, when he tore his ACL during a football game. Instead of stepping away, Gulong remained committed to his team—offering encouragement, guidance, and support from the sidelines.

For his mother, Nicole, that moment reflected just how much he had grown. "He went from being a shy kid to someone who can lead and communicate," she says. "Even when he wasn't playing, he was still there for his team."

That resilience also sparked a new passion. Through recovery, Gulong developed an interest in sports medicine and the science behind rehabilitation – an interest he intends to pursue in college. Gulong will attend Adams State University this fall with a scholarship for track and football, and plans to study physical therapy.

Through it all, one message stands out: success isn't just about talent—it's about effort, discipline, and communication. "Hillside teaches you to keep going, even when things aren't going your way," Gulong says. "Just keep showing up and giving effort."



HC Roots: Jeilo Hameniyana

Hillside Connection provided Jeilo Hameniyana community when he needed it most. Jeilo moved to Colorado Springs in third grade, new and unsure of how to make friends. His life changed when his elementary school gym teacher handed him a Hillside Connection flyer, directing him to Hillside's after-school basketball programming. He showed up to his first practice in a polo shirt and pants.

"I didn't have any friends when we moved out here. I didn't even play basketball," says Jeilo. He quickly picked up the game, connecting with kids his age through hours of practice, and continued to play at Hillside through elementary and middle school. The Hillside kids became his best friends, forming a close bond and passion for basketball that endures to this day.

Along with fostering a love of sports, Coaches Terrell and Andre shaped Jeilo's ability to handle future hurdles through challenging him to stay focused, communicate clearly, and work hard even when things felt difficult. "They always pushed me," he says. "They were hard on me, but it helped me. I was able to take that and bring it with me into high school."



Jeilo quarterbacked for Harrison High School's JV and varsity football teams, as well as played basketball. As quarterback, he stepped into a leadership role, galvanizing players to engage in moments of low morale and role modeling dedication and resilience. "Sometimes people don't want to come to practice, or are negative," said Jeilo. "I was able to say how I felt to push people and motivate them to keep going."

Jeilo used the grit he learned from Hillside Connection to stay focused on academics and be a reliable team member, earning himself a scholarship at Otero Junior College to play basketball. Jeilo plans to explore interests in sports management, business, and potentially healthcare at the university level.

For Jeilo's mother, Agnes, the impact of Hillside Connection has been just as meaningful. As a busy working mom, Hillside's free programming and dedicated community bolstered her son's upbringing – helping Jeilo become mature and responsible, as well as equipping him with the confidence to succeed in life.

"I learned to communicate, be thankful, and support the people around me," Jeilo says. "That's what community is about."



HC Roots: Philip Pogue

Athleticism is embedded in Philip Pogue. As Terrell Brown's nephew, Phil describes himself as a "day one Hillside kid," one that overflowed with energy on and off the court. As a child, Phil's excitement would lead him to "throw the ball over the hoop." Terrell's mentorship at Hillside Connection helped Phil transform his drive into craft.

Through practices with his uncle, Phil became disciplined quickly. If he identified an area of weakness during practice, he drilled himself for hours afterwards to perfect his game. He understood that dedication improved his ability to play, and was unrelenting in his self-improvement. Phil's hard work translated to an ability to tackle challenges off the court, such as his stutter, which he struggled with in elementary school.

Thanks to his years with Hillside, Phil arrived at Harrison High School a talented athlete, and captained the varsity football, basketball, and track teams from his sophomore year to his senior year. He role modeled gifted playing on his teams, but found the most important facets of leadership to be a good attitude and communication.



"You have to be positive, encourage everybody," says Phil. "As the captain, you set the tone."

Through his experience as a three-sport athlete and captain, Phil has become an adept leader – able to foster collaboration, cooperation, and genuine excitement for sports.

Aside from athletics, Phil identified a passion for the environment – one he wants to pursue at a college level. He'll attend Valley City State University this fall with a scholarship to play football, and plans to study environmental science.

Phil is grateful for all that he's learned through the Hillside community in his childhood, and plans to take his strong foundation as a leader and student to college and beyond. Most of all, he's inspired to motivate and support people the same way Hillside supported him in his youth. "I just want to help people be better and give people opportunities," he says.



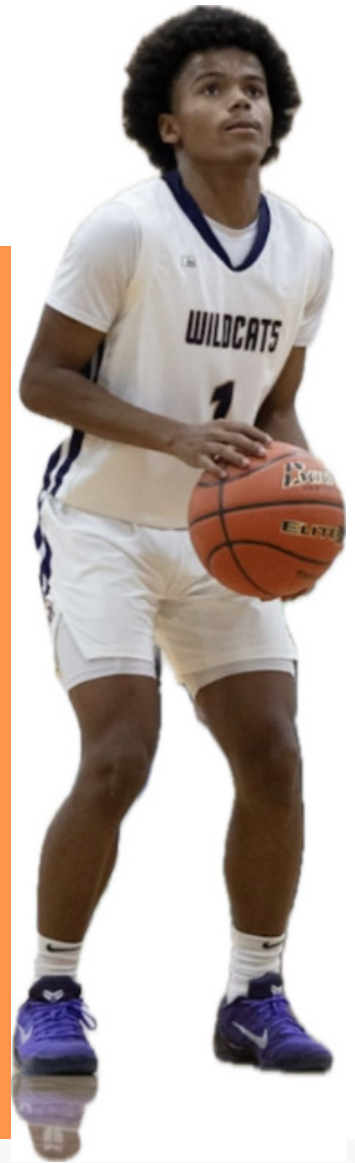
HC Roots: Bryson Harris

For Bryson Harris, Hillside Connection began with a summer basketball camp in elementary school. He had never played before, but after one week in the gym, he was hooked.

What started as a new activity evolved into a safe space that Bryson sought throughout his young adulthood. Through Hillside, Bryson learned the fundamentals of basketball while developing discipline, accountability, and resilience – lessons that continue to shape him today as a senior at Oak Harbor High School in Washington. “They taught me it’s not just about basketball,” Bryson says. “It’s about what you do when people aren’t watching.”

From early morning conditioning workouts to academic accountability checks, Hillside emphasized hard work both on and off the court. Coaches Terrell and Andre taught Bryson how to stay focused, honor commitments, and push through challenges.

Additionally, Hillside Connection introduced Bryson to the Sachs Foundation, an organization that supports Black coloradans’ access to higher education through scholarships. When Bryson’s family experienced a devastating house fire at the end of his eighth-grade year, forcing them to relocate to Washington, the Sachs Foundation financially supported their transition.



During that move, Hillside and Coach Terrell remained a source of support and mentorship for Bryson and his family. “Coach Terrell still stayed in contact with Bryson even after we moved,” his mother, Melissa, says. “That mentorship really changed him.”

Basketball also helped Bryson adjust to life in a new state, giving him a way to build friendships and find community. Later, after suffering a serious ankle injury before his sophomore season, he leaned on the same perseverance Hillside had taught him to work through months of recovery and return to the court.

“He told me, ‘I’m going to play, and I’m going to be on varsity,’” Melissa recalls. “And he did.”

Now preparing for graduation, Bryson plans to study business at Ohio Christian University, where he has a basketball scholarship. He’s grateful for the mentorship he had through Hillside, and looks forward to his future chapter.



HC Roots: Calegero Sarcomo

Calegero “Cee” Sarcomo arrived at Hillside Connection with a quiet and level-headed spirit, drawn to Hillside’s competitive environment and eager to play. Raised by a single mother, Hillside Connection’s basketball program provided structure and mentorship outside the home for Cee while his mother worked.

Calegero joined Hillside in elementary school after hearing about the program through a YMCA basketball team. Through year-round basketball and summer programming, he formed close relationships with teammates and coaches while developing a strong work ethic that carried into high school athletics.

One of the biggest influences in his life was Coach Terrell, whose calm and encouraging leadership left a lasting impression. “Just staying positive throughout everything,” Calegero says. “Especially during basketball, because there’s a lot of ups and downs.”



For Calegero’s mother, Terra, Hillside’s impact went far beyond sports. “He was one of the best coaches he’s ever had,” she says. “He always encouraged the kids and pushed them in a positive way.”

Those lessons followed Calegero into high school, where he became a multi-sport athlete in basketball, baseball, and soccer. He served as captain of his soccer team from sophomore through senior year, learning how to lead by staying positive and putting the team first. “The beginning was hard because it’s a lot of responsibility,” he says. “But you learn to put the team over yourself.”

Even after moving to Illinois during the pandemic, Calegero has remained connected to the Hillside community and the mentors who helped shape him. Now preparing for graduation, he plans to enlist in the Air Force and pursue lineman training, carrying with him the discipline and resilience he developed through Hillside Connection.



HC Roots: Xaia Zamundu

For Xaia, known professionally as DJ Xoomie, Hillside Connection became a place where music, community, and culture came together.

Xaia first connected with Hillside a few years ago after being invited to DJ basketball tournaments and events through community connections. Since then, she has helped create the soundtrack for youth basketball games, tournaments, and community gatherings across Colorado Springs. “I love seeing that community thrive,” Xaia says. “It’s really fun to watch and also create the atmosphere for everybody.”

Whether DJing outdoor tournaments at Memorial Park or gatherings hosted through Hillside, Xaia became a familiar presence in the community. For Xaia, DJing is more than entertainment – it’s a way to celebrate culture and bring people together. “Especially being based in Colorado Springs, finding the Black community can feel limited,” she says. “I like exposing people to the culture as much as I can.”



She began DJing at just twelve years old during the pandemic, taking virtual classes through Denver DJ School and earning a scholarship to continue her training. Since then, she has built a growing platform through events, silent discos, parties, and community programs while developing her own style rooted in R&B, hip-hop, and cultural storytelling.

Hillside mentor Terrell Brown is one of her biggest supporters, consistently encouraging her work and helping connect her with new opportunities. “He’s always reaching out and wanting to include me,” Xaia says. “He loves putting me on.”

Now preparing to graduate from The Colorado Springs School, Xaia is looking ahead to her next chapter at Howard University, where she plans to study journalism. Passionate about fashion, music, and writing, she hopes to use storytelling and media to continue uplifting culture and community.



HC Roots: Javon Gibbs

For Javon, Hillside Connection was the foundation that helped him build confidence, friendships, and a sense of belonging.

Javon joined Hillside as a young kid and spent four to five years participating in basketball leagues, tournaments, and summer programming. At the time, he was shy and often worried about what others thought of him. Through Hillside's coaches, mentors, and team environment, he gradually stepped out of his comfort zone and began to grow more confident in himself.

"The leadership and mentorship helped me improve my social skills," Javon says. "I built so many friendships and met so many people who wanted to see me succeed."

One of his favorite memories was winning a major tournament with his teammates. Celebrating together showed him the power of community and helped inspire him to become more outgoing. Many of the friendships he formed through Hillside remain strong today.



As he entered high school, Javon explored football and track and field, where he discovered new confidence in his athletic abilities. After encouragement from a coach who recognized his potential, he committed himself more fully to sports.

During his senior year, Javon helped Harrison High School's relay teams break both school and state records in the 4x100 and 4x200 relays. "That really brought out a new person in me," he says. "It gave me a lot more confidence."

"What Hillside means to me is the foundation of everything," he says. "It helped me get out of my comfort zone, build my confidence, and create a community around me."

For Javon, Hillside Connection became more than a basketball program—it became a place where he learned to believe in himself and the possibilities ahead.



HC Roots: Isaiah Peak

Isaiah Peak lived in many states in his adolescence: Colorado in elementary school, Arizona through middle and high school, and finally landed in Texas his senior year. Learning basketball through Hillside Connection in elementary school helped Isaiah build the foundation for sport that carried him through these life transitions, enabling him to succeed socially and athletically.

“Without Hillside, I wouldn’t have been good at basketball at a young age,” says Isaiah. “It really helped me when I moved, I was able to connect with others through the sport.”

Isaiah found Hillside in second grade, and credits Hillside Connection’s competitive play and dedicated coaches with his talent and love of the game. “It was intense, but that motivated us all to get better and work hard,” says Isaiah. “We learned resilience early.”



Not only did Isaiah learn resilience through Hillside Connection, but he learned that to succeed in life, you need to work hard in all that you do – not just sports.

Isaiah took the lesson to heart, excelling in middle and high school academics handily. In high school, Isaiah balanced academics, a job, and varsity basketball and track and field. Through his hard athletic work, Isaiah supported his basketball team to win a district championship his senior year – despite having moved from Arizona to Texas that fall and being new to the team. Additionally, Isaiah qualified for state in track and field his junior year in the four by four hundred relay, high jump, and triple jump.

Isaiah’s mom, Precious, witnessed his growth at Hillside Connection and saw how it equipped him for the future. “He went through a lot of change as a kid. I think he learned how to maintain a positive attitude at Hillside, and that really carried,” says Precious.

Isaiah is now looking towards the future, set to play basketball at Paris Junior College this fall, where he plans on studying business. He’s grateful that Hillside started his athletic journey off on a strong foot, and hopes to give back in the future.



HC Roots: Tayten Franco

For Tayten, Hillside Connection became a place that challenged him to grow as both a basketball player and a person.

Tayten joined Hillside in fifth grade after hearing about the program through the local basketball community.

What started as a summer program quickly became a year-round commitment that helped shape his mindset on and off the court. “It made me want to give my best every day and challenge myself to be better,” Tayten says.

Through Hillside’s coaches and culture, he learned discipline, accountability, and the importance of listening and staying focused in school and sports. “You’ve got to stay in the gym and stay dedicated,” he says.



Those lessons carried into his time at Harrison High School, where he played varsity basketball all four years as a point guard. By his senior season, he had stepped into a leadership role, helping encourage teammates and stay mentally prepared each night.

Beyond basketball, Hillside also gave Tayten a strong sense of community. “It’s a family over there,” he says. “Those are my brothers I grew up with.”

Now preparing for graduation, Tayten plans to attend Premium Prep Academy in Nashville, Tennessee, where he will continue developing his game before pursuing college basketball opportunities. Looking back, Tayten says he’s grateful for the mentorship and support Hillside Connection provided throughout his journey.

“They opened a lot of doors for people,” he says. “I’m so grateful.”



HC Roots: LaLannie Donald

LaLannie Donald started playing basketball on the sidelines. While her older brother competed with Hillside's boys' league, LaLannie dribbled off the court. "Terrell encouraged me to join the drills," says LaLannie. "There was no girls' team yet."

LaLannie took her interest in basketball to school, quickly becoming a dedicated player. As a naturally skilled athlete and hard worker, LaLannie excelled at basketball and was shaped

Over the next nine years, basketball molded her character, teaching resilience, patience, teamwork, and the value of hard work. Those lessons carried her through challenges both on and off the court, including staying true to her herself in the midst of difficult team dynamics that tested her confidence when she was younger.



"Basketball has definitely played a big role in shaping who I am – not only building character but also revealing it," she says. Today, LaLannie uses those same lessons at camps and practices when mentoring young adults, encouraging players who become frustrated or doubt themselves.

"I always tell them to be patient with themselves and never give up," she says. "You have to keep practicing and investing in yourself."

Basketball and track became major parts of LaLannie's high school experience. She balanced varsity athletics, club basketball in Denver, and academics. This fall, she will continue both sports at Colorado College, where she plans to study sociology while competing in basketball and track.

"Hillside helps kids build confidence and gives them opportunities they might not otherwise have," she says.

What began as a young girl dribbling a basketball on the sidelines has grown into a future college athlete, mentor, and leader. Through Hillside Connection, LaLannie found not only a love for sports, but also a chance to inspire the next generation of athletes following in her footsteps.



HC Roots: Quincy Mosley

For Quincy, Hillside Connection sparked a passion that continues to shape his future.

What began as weekend games on the blacktop at Memorial Park quickly grew into a love for basketball that stayed with him long after his family moved from Colorado Springs to Wisconsin during middle school.

“It helped me build a love for the game,” Quincy says. “The coaches always pushed me to be the best player I could be.” The lessons he learned at Hillside extended beyond basketball. Coaches emphasized teamwork, leadership, and supporting others—qualities Quincy carried into high school, where he became a point guard on the basketball team and a leader on both the basketball court and football field.



“My job was to push my teammates to be the best they could be, stay positive, and do what we had to do to win,” he says.

Quincy's senior year was his most memorable. He earned first team all-conference honors in basketball, all-city recognition, honorable mention all-conference in football, and was selected to play in Wisconsin's state all-star basketball game.

His mother, Rachel, credits Hillside with helping shape the person he became. “It gave him a purpose and a passion,” she says. “It helped shape his character, leadership skills, and confidence. ”

This fall, Quincy will spend a postgraduate year at a prep school near Tampa, Florida, continuing to develop his game before pursuing college basketball opportunities.

Although his family left Colorado years ago, Quincy says the relationships he built through Hillside have never faded.

“Hillside is a place to connect with people and build bonds,” he says. “There are a bunch of great people there who help you become a better person.”



HC Roots: Micah Ashley

When Micah first joined Hillside Connection's summer basketball program as an elementary school student, he had never played organized basketball before. His mom, Nikki, was simply looking for a positive place where he could stay active, build friendships, and spend time with caring mentors.

"I know the community was good," Micah says. "It kept me out of the house... it gave me something to do."

For Nikki, Hillside Connection offered something just as meaningful. After becoming a single parent, she appreciated knowing her son was surrounded by positive role models.

As Micah spent summers with Hillside Connection, he grew more confident—not only on the court, but in everyday life.

"Before Hillside, I was not as outgoing as a person," he says. "Talking to people more was actually better for me."

Those communication skills carried into high school, where Micah competed in basketball, football, track, and baseball. Along the way, he learned resilience, teamwork, and leadership, often stepping up to encourage teammates even without an official captain's title.

"It helped me with my emotions and how to control them," Micah says. "It also helped me learn how to lead people better and how to talk to people."

Now a graduate of Mitchell High School, Micah plans to enlist in the military before pursuing a career as a police officer or firefighter.

"I like to help people," he says.

For Micah, Hillside Connection provided more than a place to play basketball. It helped him build confidence, develop leadership skills, and discover the kind of person he wanted to become.



HC Roots: Deja Burns

Long before Hillside Connection offered a girls basketball program, Deja found her way onto the court anyway. While her brother and cousin participated in the program, she joined practices whenever she could, competing alongside the boys and sharpening her skills against tougher competition.

"I had to adjust," Deja says. "I had to get better on defense and offense."

That determination carried her through an outstanding high school basketball career at Sierra High School, where she became team captain and broke her school's blocked shots record multiple times. But for Deja, leadership has always meant more than athletic success.

"My role was just to make sure that all my teammates weren't in their heads," she says. "This is what we need to do, and this is how we're going to do it."



As Hillside Connection expanded its opportunities, Deja gave back by volunteering at youth basketball clinics and mentoring younger students through school visits. Whether encouraging a shy camper or speaking to middle school students about the transition to high school, she discovered a passion for helping others succeed.

"If kids have someone who is willing to help them... and they can build trust with them, then I feel like that's when things are good," she says

This fall, Deja will continue her basketball career at Seward County Community College while pursuing her dream of becoming a social worker. Inspired by classmates whose struggles often went unseen, she hopes to become someone young people can turn to when they need support.

"I want to be that person to be there to help somebody in need," she says.

From competing on the court to mentoring the next generation, Deja's journey reflects the ripple effect of Hillside Connection's mission. With opportunities to lead, serve, and grow, she's preparing to make a difference in her community—both as an athlete and as someone dedicated to helping others thrive.

