



GEORGIA
TO NYC

ROAD TRIP





THINK BEFORE YOU MOVE

Athens - Georgia

In March 2023 5asideCHESS were invited by Lemuel Laroche, Tedx speaker of **'The Power of a Single Hour'** (watch it if you haven't already) and founder of Chess & Community to attend the 10th annual conference in Athens, Georgia. We have been following the journey of Chess & Community for some time and were keen to see for ourselves his work and how our two social enterprises could work more closely together.

In keeping with the non-profit's vision of empowering young people through chess, the conference itself was led mainly by the youth members of Chess & Community who delivered an inspiring, polished and well-rehearsed agenda which demonstrated the use of technology such as robotics and AI alongside the lessons that can be learned from a traditional game of chess. After the conference we set a number of "check mate in 2" puzzles on the 5asideCHESS board and it was great to see how the youngsters engaged with the smaller board and our conversation starter guide. It was interesting to see their problem solving methodology.

One of the fantastic things to see was the support of both the police and the Sheriff and his deputies who had come along to the conference to play chess and forge closer connections between the authorities and youth. We were privileged to be introduced by Lemuel to Sheriff John Williams, Chief law-enforcer of Athens-Clarke County and Deputy Frank Woods, who subsequently invited us in to Athens Clarke County Jail the following Monday to talk about the 5asideCHESS WingMAN programme in UK prisons and discuss how it could work in their justice system.

As you would expect there are both similarities and difference between UK and US prisons but one of the main reasons we use chess is because it is a common language that is used all over the world in every environment.

There are so many things about how the 5asideCHESS WingMAN programme is used in UK prisons that could work equally well in the States and we were excited to talk to the staff and feel their enthusiasm for working together. Just one of the stories we shared which clearly struck a chord was that we were told by one of the men in Pentonville, who had done the 5 week 5asideCHESS personal development programme, that it has helped him realise that he backs himself into a corner in real life just as much as he does on the chess board and then gets himself into trouble battling out of it. Now that he recognises his behaviour and response to this situation, he has a chance to make changes to how he acts.

We're looking forward to furthering a partnership with all of those people and organisations we met in Athens. We can all learn from each other.



1200 miles and many games of 5asideCHESS and fascinating, serendipitous encounters later, we arrived in New York City - home of so many well known icons such as the Statue of Liberty and Empire State Building and the lesser known, but no less iconic, Chess Forum, in Greenwich Village.



On our walk from mid town Manhattan to Chess Forum on a cold, wet, Saturday morning we stopped at a Dunkin' Donuts for breakfast (don't judge!). On our way in, a man with a wide, warm smile opened the door for us and we thanked him and thought nothing more of it. Once sat inside though, we realised he was doing this for everyone and then asking for money as they left. We were interested in his story and invited him to join us for coffee and of course, a game of 5asideCHESS.

We often talk about how 5asideCHESS is a connector, a leveller and a way of breaking down barriers and this meeting of minds was as good an example as any of this in action. Dee is one of NYC's many homeless people; he has lived all over the USA, spent time on Rikers Island and has recently married. He has hopes and dreams like everyone else, worries about money constantly and often feels invisible. Every morning he gets up early and spends 10 hours a day opening doors for tourists and locals. He doesn't see it as begging. Dee has his time on Rikers Island to thank for being able to play chess and he understood using the game as a metaphor for life. One of the things he talked about was how critical it is to have a plan and how you need to be able to keep that plan going through distraction and boredom. It doesn't matter whether it's avoiding being distracted during a game, in a business meeting or by a loud motorbike going by when you are about to ask for money. Yet another example of a life skill that can be thought about and talked about by playing 5asideCHESS and we'll definitely be building this into our WingMAN training.



Entering Chess Forum was like stepping into another world in another time. Outside it was still cold, wet and miserable but inside, amongst the treasure trove of chess sets, books and boxes, the welcome was warm.

At the back of the shop was the inner sanctum where an eclectic mix of regulars were playing chess. This included Doc, reputedly 100 years old, who introduced himself as a time traveller. Somehow the setting made this seem not impossible. Chess is a serious business here which is somewhat counter to the 5asideCHESS ethos but you could see how important it was to these people that they had somewhere to go, people to be with and a means of connecting.



Ian, a former child of the competitive chess tournament circuit, found 5asideCHESS unexpectedly more challenging than he had thought. We find that quite often with serious chess players; they dismiss 5asideCHESS as too easy, only to find that being thrown in to the middle game so quickly presents them with unexpected challenges that cause them to have to think. Traditional chess is a battlefield, or as award-winning author, John Healy describes it, a bloodsport. At 5asideCHESS we use the shorter game as a common language, a tool for connection and as a sociable means of exploring life skills. It's also a great way of connecting inter-generationally. Older people can benefit from the energy of youngsters whilst they in turn can learn from the wisdom of their elders. Doc shared what he sees as the problem with society today; 'they're doing 3 things wrong - not learning from the past, not thinking about the present and not planning for the future'. Given that he's a time-traveller, we should probably all listen.

Our last day in NYC on Sunday saw us return to Chess Forum to meet owner Imad, a Palestinian refugee with no family of his own, who has become "the father of everybody", to a community of chess enthusiasts, those curious to learn more about the game, and those whom he describes as the city's "invisible people." Imad's philosophy is life affirming, "When no other place will welcome you, you have a seat here". Inspiring and a philosophy we share at our own 5asideCHESS and Life cafe outside Cambridge where we promise to welcome you all.

