

### The Vacant Lot

Jerome woke up early on Monday morning. He quickly got dressed, ate his breakfast, and ran out the door, shouting, "Got to go, Mom, the basketball tournament starts today!"

He sprinted the six blocks to school. He ran past the barbershop, the library, Mr. Jones' corner store, and that vacant lot that was a mixture of concrete, dirt, weeds, and garbage. "Ugh," he thought, "why doesn't anyone do anything about that place?"

When he got to school, he hurried to the basketball court. "What's up, Malik?" he said, and nodded to his best friend.

"Not much," Malik replied with a smile. "Same old soup, reheated!" They both burst out laughing. They turned and watched the other students warming up, while they stretched out and waited for the rest of their team to show up.

They played their first game of the tournament against some kids from Mr. Lopez's class. It was a close game, and Jerome and his team almost won. On their way in from the courts, the group of friends talked about how they wished they had been able to practice more in preparation for the tournament. They vowed they would try harder next time.

When class began, Ms. Swanson started off by discussing their upcoming service project. They had been reading stories about people who wanted to make a difference in their community. "Now it's your turn," said Ms. Swanson, as she described the project. They had to work in teams of five to plan a volunteer project that would help their community. Jerome looked around the classroom at Malik, Leticia, Amber, and Miguel. They smiled; they knew who their team was!

That afternoon, the five friends walked home together. They all lived on the same block and had been friends since kindergarten. They talked excitedly about ideas for the project. "Maybe we could paint a mural!" said Amber. She loved art and was always painting or drawing something.

"Or we could have a food drive and collect food!" said Malik, who loved to eat.

"You would probably eat it all, Malik," said Leticia, and they all started laughing. They couldn't decide on anything, so they agreed to talk about it in the morning on the way to school.

The next morning they met up in front of Jerome's house. They brainstormed ideas as they walked to school. They were almost there when Jerome stopped suddenly. "Hey, what about that spot?" he asked, looking across the street at the vacant lot next to the corner store.

"What about it?" asked Miguel, and rolled his eyes.

"Wait, hold on and listen to me," Jerome pleaded. "What do we end up doing every single weekend?"

They looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders. "I don't know," said Malik.

"Does anyone play outside?" asked Jerome.

"Nooo," they all said slowly, looking at each other.

"Exactly!" Jerome shouted. "The school yard is locked on the weekend, and I know none of our parents let us go to the park by ourselves; it's too far away! Wouldn't it be cool if we had a park with a basketball court on our own block?"

The five friends slowly looked at each other and started to grin. They talked eagerly about their plan the whole way to school. When they got to school, they got started right away. First, they found Ms. Swanson in the classroom and told her their plan. She loved their idea. Then, they made a list of all the tasks they needed to complete.

Since it was Jerome's idea, they elected him team captain for the project. He would find out who owned the property and ask for the owner's permission to clean it up. Amber and Leticia would talk to other kids and their parents to recruit some volunteers to help with the clean-up. Miguel and Malik would request donations from local businesses. They couldn't wait to get started.

On their way home from school, Jerome stopped off at the corner store to ask Mr. Jones about the owner of the vacant lot. Mr. Jones told him that the lot had been empty and abandoned for as long as he could remember, but he thought that the owner lived in the old house just to the right of the vacant lot.

"You'd better ask permission before you start digging around over there," Mr. Jones said.

Jerome started to have second thoughts. What if the owner didn't like kids? He walked home slowly, thinking about all the obstacles the group would have to overcome to make their plan a reality. When he got home, he called Malik and explained his thoughts.

"Maybe we should do another project," Jerome mumbled. "Maybe we should just give up on this one."

"What?" Malik shouted. "What kind of team captain are you? I already got donations from all the guys at the barbershop. We can't stop now! Did we walk off the court when we were down by six points with only two minutes left to play?"

Jerome thought back to their basketball game the day before. They hadn't given up; they had played even harder even though they had lost the game. Even then, they weren't giving up. Instead, they had vowed to try harder the next time.

"You're right, Malik," he said. "Let's do this!" He decided he would track down the owner of the vacant lot as soon as school got out the next day.

As the friends walked to school in the morning, they talked about their progress. Leticia and Amber had made several signs to hang up at school to recruit volunteers. Malik and Miguel had received some money from neighborhood businesses, and the owner of the hardware store had donated a bunch of tools. Then they all looked at Jerome.

"Relax," he said. "I found the address of the lady who owns the property. Her name is Mrs. Hardimon. I'll stop by today on my way home."

That afternoon, he walked by himself to the house next to the vacant lot. It looked old and run-down and had just as many weeds in the yard as the vacant lot. For a second, Jerome felt nervous. "Pretend this is basketball," he thought, "Shake it off." He took a deep breath and knocked on the door. He waited a while and didn't hear anything. "Great, another dead end," he thought.

Just then, he heard footsteps inside. The door opened, and he saw a woman who looked older than his great-grandmother. She frowned and said, "What do you want?"

"Umm," he stammered. "Umm, my name is Jerome, and I live in this neighborhood."

The woman frowned again. "Well," she said, "I don't want to buy anything, and I don't have anything to give away, so I don't know why you're bothering me." And with that, she shut the door right in Jerome's face!

Jerome's first response was to get angry. How dare she shut the door on him! He wanted to storm away and tell his friends what a mean woman she was. As his foot hit the sidewalk, though, he could hear Malik's voice echoing in his mind.

He stopped. He thought about how often he and his friends had faced tough opponents on the basketball court. He took a deep breath and reminded himself that he was the captain of the team. His friends were counting on him.

Jerome looked around the yard at all the weeds. He thought about the old woman and how hard it must be for her to bend down to work in the yard. He thought about how he might feel if he were in her situation, and he reached down with both hands and started pulling weeds.

After almost an hour, Jerome had a huge pile of weeds stacked neatly in the corner of the yard. "If we get to clean up the empty lot," he thought, maybe we can remove this pile at the same time." He stretched his tired arms and back and looked around, amazed at how much nicer the yard looked. He went back to the front door and knocked on the door again.

This time, the woman answered more quickly. She swung the door open and started to say, "YOU again!" when she caught sight of her front yard. Her mouth flew open in shock, and she looked down at Jerome with a new willingness to listen.

He jumped at the opportunity. "My friends and I wanted to ask you about the lot

next door. Do you have any plans for it?"

She gazed across the fence toward the vacant lot and shook her head. "I used to have the most beautiful garden over there," she said. "I've gotten too old to take care of it myself, so I had to let it go. I hired someone to build that fence so I wouldn't have to look at it anymore."

"Well, maybe we can help," Jerome said with a smile, and he explained their project. Mrs. Hardimon kept looking at her own front yard as he spoke. When he fell silent, she turned to him. Her eyes were glistening, and her voice shook a little bit when she spoke.

"Son," she said, "I would be honored to host a community park."

Jerome felt a rush of adrenaline hit his bloodstream. They were on! He couldn't wait to gather his friends into a team huddle and share the good news.

**1. What sport did Jerome and his friend Malik like?**

- A. Soccer.
- B. Baseball.
- C. Basketball.

**2. How did Jerome feel about the messy vacant lot he ran by on his way to school?**

- A. He thought the lot was ugly but didn't think anyone should bother to clean it.
- B. He thought the vacant lot was ugly, and someone should clean it up.
- C. He thought that Mr. Jones and other business owners should clean up the lot.

**3. Why did Jerome and his four friends smile at each other after their teacher said the students were to work in teams?**

- A. They were showing that they agreed to be a team.
- B. They thought the assignment was going to be fun.
- C. They were thinking that the assignment was silly.

**4. What was this story mostly about?**

- A. How messy vacant lots can be fixed up.
- B. How friends found a new place to play ball.
- C. How friends carried out a class assignment.

- 5. What did the friends decide about their project when they talked on their way home?**
- A. They couldn't decide what to do and made plans to meet the next morning.
  - B. They couldn't agree on what to do, so they left it up to Jerome to decide.
  - C. They decided to have a food drive to collect food for the poor.
- 6. What was the second thing that happened after Ms. Swanson accepted the children's idea for a class project?**
- A. Jerome was elected as the team captain.
  - B. They made a list of all the tasks they need to do.
  - C. Jerome had to find out who owned the vacant lot.
- 7. What did Malik probably mean when he said that things were like the "same old soup, reheated?"**
- A. He was tired of doing the same old thing day after day.
  - B. There wasn't anything different than usual going on in his life.
  - C. Meeting at the same place every day to play basketball was boring.
- 8. What did Jerome tell his friends after they told him how well they had done with their tasks?**
- A. He wasn't sure who the owner of the lot was, but he would find out.
  - B. He was glad they had gotten a lot done, but he still didn't know what to do.
  - C. He had the address of the lady who owned the lot, and he would talk to her.
- 9. What was the first task that Amber and Leticia had to do for their part of the class project?**
- A. Find out who owned the vacant lot.
  - B. Get money donations from businesses.
  - C. Get volunteers to help clean up the lot.
- 10. What was Jerome like when he started on his first task for the class project?**
- A. He began to feel like he couldn't do it and wanted to give up.
  - B. He was very excited and went to talk to the owner of the lot.
  - C. He began to think that the project was going to be a lot of fun.



- 11. At first, why did Jerome have second thoughts about talking to the owner of the vacant lot?**
- A. It was getting late, and he had to get home.
  - B. He thought the owner might not like kids.
  - C. He thought the owner wouldn't like their idea.
- 12. How was Jerome feeling when he got to the house of the woman who owned the lot?**
- A. He was nervous but determined to do his task like he said he would.
  - B. He felt confident that he would get the woman to agree to their plan.
  - C. He hoped the woman wouldn't be home so he wouldn't have to talk to her.
- 13. What was Malik like?**
- A. He wanted to do the project but didn't think the group should work so hard.
  - B. He had a good attitude about work but was nervous about the project.
  - C. He was ready to do the project and was encouraging to Jerome.
- 14. How long had the five children in the story been friends?**
- A. Since they moved to the same block.
  - B. Since they were in kindergarten.
  - C. Since the families moved to the neighborhood.
- 15. What advice did Malik give Jerome about going ahead with his task?**
- A. Not to give up, just like when they played basketball.
  - B. Stop acting like a little kid and just do his job as captain.
  - C. Be willing to accept defeat, like they did when they lost a game.
- 16. What was the woman who owned the property like when Jerome first talked with her at her door?**
- A. She acted like a kindly grandmother but didn't want to talk just then.
  - B. She was older, didn't want to be bothered, and was rude.
  - C. She didn't know what to think about what Jerome was trying to say.

- 17. What did Jerome keep remembering every time he wanted to give up on the task that he was to do?**
- A. That he needed to have the same attitude as when he played basketball.
  - B. That he needed to finish his task to get what he and the others wanted.
  - C. That his teacher expected him to turn in a good project to get a good grade.
- 18. What type of reasoning did Jerome use to convince his friends to go for his idea about making the messy vacant lot their class project?**
- A. Their teacher would think it was a good idea.
  - B. It would be a good service to the community.
  - C. They would get something they wanted from it.
- 19. Why did Jerome decide to pull the weeds in the woman's yard?**
- A. He simply felt sorry for her and wanted to help her.
  - B. He wanted to show her what the vacant lot would look like.
  - C. He wanted the weed pulling to be part of the school project.
- 20. How did the story end?**
- A. Mrs. Hardimon said that Jerome and his friends could come back anytime to pull weeds for her.
  - B. Mrs. Hardimon thanked Jerome for pulling her weeds but didn't want anyone to touch her lot.
  - C. Mrs. Hardimon let Jerome explain the plan, and she agreed to it, making Jerome very happy.