

Brotherly Love: How a Sixers co-partner is getting stars of all kinds to pitch in

By Michael Lee Apr 20, 2020

Michael Ruben has never been one to sit around the house idly, and especially not one to watch live television. But these shelter-at-home days have forced many into uncomfortable and unusual positions as people collectively attempt to diminish the spread of COVID-19. Rubin's days had been filled with hours of unsettling CNN consumption until he plotted ways to combat the bad news scrolling on those chrysons at the bottom of his big screen.

"I'm the type of person, I really believe every negative has to be turned into a positive," Rubin, the billionaire e-commerce entrepreneur and partner of both the Philadelphia 76ers and New Jersey Devils, said in a telephone interview with The Athletic. "That is my fundamental belief. Whatever you throw at me, I'm going to figure out a way to make it positive. That's the approach I take with this."

After seeing the concerns of healthcare workers over the lack of personal protective equipment, Rubin decided that he'd repurpose his 360,000 square foot sports



manufacturing plant in Easton, Pa., and make one million masks and gowns from the same fabric as MLB jerseys. But he knew that partnership with MLB wasn't going to be enough for a pandemic that was ravaging every aspect of society. Rubin had the means and the connections to do more. He quickly discovered others wanted to do the same.

Acknowledging that some pharmaceutical company was likely to find the necessary vaccine or treatment for the novel coronavirus, Rubin began

to focus on where he could be most useful. Then it hit him. Food insecurity is a pressing problem with millions losing their jobs, the elderly lacking access to services and children out of school, where some depend on that lunch to be their only guaranteed meal for the day.

Rubin decided that he could use his friends and business partners in the sports industry to raise money to provide food for the hungry by auctioning off either a prized possession or a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Shortly after the idea popped into his head, Rubin picked up the phone and called his good friend, rapper Meek Mill – "Meek's like a brother to me," Rubin said – to see what he thought.

Meek Mill, whose real name is Robert Rihmeek Williams, first told Rubin that he was one of those kids who worried about where his next meal came from, growing up in North Philadelphia. Then, he asked Rubin why he planned to limit the effort to just athletes.

"Why wouldn't you do this with artists like me, or celebrities like Kevin Hart?" Rubin recalled Meek Mill telling him. "So, I said, 'You're right. Let's do this with athletes, celebrities and artists.' He said, 'Great. I'm in.'"

Rubin asked what he was willing to contribute and Meek Mill offered up his 2018 Rolls Royce Phantom. "I said, 'Are you serious?'" He said, "Michael, I don't need the car. I want to help feed people. So, yes, I want to donate that car," Rubin recalled. "I was just blown away."

Rubin's next phone call was to comedian and Philly sports die-hard Kevin Hart. This time, Rubin didn't ask Hart what he was willing to offer, he suggested that Hart donate the experience of training someone. "Kevin said, 'Become someone's trainer? Screw that! I'm going to make somebody a movie star. I'm going to give somebody a part in my movie,'" Rubin said. "When Kevin told me that, I said, 'Hold up, I've made two phone calls, within a half hour of coming up with this idea. Meek tells me he's going to donate his Rolls Royce Phantom, and Kevin is going to make somebody a movie star.' I said, 'I think I'm on to something.'"

Two weeks later, Rubin announced on his personal Instagram account, the #ALLINCHALLENGE – an ambitious endeavor that offers plenty of hope for fun in a post-coronavirus existence – in which he called on "every athlete, sports team owner, sports league, artist, celebrity and business titan to go all-in with me." Inspired by the success of the 2014 Ice Bucket challenge, which raised \$220 million worldwide for ALS research, and seeking to top the \$58 million raised from the 'Hope for Haiti' telethon in response to the devastating 2010 earthquake, Rubin was fervid about what could come as a result of this project.

Rubin sought advice from his friend, Spring CEO Alan Tisch, who helped him broaden the participation from wealthy donors in highest-bidder auctions to allow people to enter sweepstakes for other opportunities by purchasing ticket packages beginning at \$10. After accumulating a few more ideas from friends and business partners, Rubin presented the plan to Doug Mack, CEO of Fanatics – which falls under Rubin's Kynetic company and possessed the digital imprint to carry out the massive endeavor online.

"I said, 'Doug, this is what I want to do. Make this happen.' We put the team together and it's hundreds of people at Fanatics working on it," Rubin said. "And then I also just started calling every artist, every celebrity, every athlete that I know and said, 'Here's my idea.' Everyone right away was like, 'I'm already doing a ton. But I want to do more. So I'm all in. And people just started coming up with crazy ideas.'"

Partnering with Tisch and VaynerX chairman, Gary Vaynerchuk,



Rubin has been overwhelmed by the outpouring of support. A-listers and VIPs have lined up to make a difference. In addition to Meek Mill and Hart, Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert De Niro are offering a walk-in role in their next film with director Martin Scorsese and attendance at the red-carpet premiere. Ellen DeGeneres will have someone co-host her hit talk show. Drake is giving away the OVO experience, complete with a flight on his gaudy private jet, Air Drake, to Los Angeles. Justin Bieber will serenade one lucky fan at their home with his hit, "One Less Lonely Girl." Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban is offering a one-day contract with his team.

Madonna, Justin Timberlake, Bill Murray, Matthew McConaughey, Gwyneth Paltrow, Magic Johnson, Derek Jeter and 76ers stars Joel Embiid and Ben Simmons have all decided to go "all in." Participants explained their offers in a social media post while challenging anyone else to get on board. Fans can bid on the chance to throw out the first pitch at a World Series game or to get selected in the 2021 NBA draft.

"I think we all need it right now. We all need the love. We all need the relief. So anybody that's down to give all they can to the All-In Challenge, I recommend you do. Shoutout to Michael Rubin," Drake said at the end of his Instagram post.



Tom Brady has made available tickets to his first game with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, in addition to his game-worn jersey and cleats. Alex Rodriguez is donating batting lessons, lunch and his 2009 World Series trophy. Peyton Manning will play golf and have dinner with someone in their hometown. Rubin didn't know Manning very well but was stunned by what happened after hearing about his donation – he got a text from Manning's younger brother.

"He said, 'Hey, it's Eli Manning.'"

"I've never met Eli Manning or spoke to him before and he sends me the video of him donating the 2011 Super Bowl MVP Corvette," Rubin said. "Peyton Manning, I know but I'm not tight with him. Peyton has been checking with me, day in, day out, 'How's it going? How can I help out?' And that's amazing to me. And Tom Brady has also checked in multiple times. Those two have really surprised me, not just doing something great but saying how can they go over and above. But I tell you another thing, I'm not going to name names, but there are also some people who have disappointed me as well. Life is short, but you put that in the back of your head."

The All-In Challenge had already surpassed \$10 million in funds raised after only four days, and all proceeds will go toward five charities — Meals on Wheels, No Kid Hungry, America's Food Fund, World Central Kitchen and Feeding America. New prizes will be added each day as more famous people get involved. "Pulling something like this off is a gigantic undertaking," Rubin said. "You don't launch this thing and hope it works, we talked to a lot of people in advance to make sure that they were going to go All-In and do something really incredible. What people are contributing is really insane."

As for his contribution, Rubin has put up an ultimate fan package, with tickets to the Super Bowl, the first games of the NBA Finals, Stanley Cup finals and World Series, the Olympics opening ceremony and select events, the college football and college basketball championships, the Daytona 500, the Masters, and more. "I'm super passionate about making an impact," Rubin said. "I'll tell you, certainly had it not been for my calls with Meek and Kevin Hart, the first two calls that I made, I would've never done this. If they didn't respond to me the way that they did, that would not have given me the excitement, the passion to say, 'OK, this isn't only a good idea, but I can get this done.' The All-In Challenge wouldn't exist without Kevin Hart and Meek Mill. That's just the bottom line. Just truth."

"The last three weeks, I've done nothing but this. Working 18, 20 hours a day. Most of my net worth sits in private company stock, but I'm contributing many different millions of dollars into different corona initiatives," Rubin said. "I've built my whole life on bringing people together. That's what I'm good at. I'm not that smart. I'm not like a good athlete. But I'm still somebody who likes to bring people together. The idea of bringing all of these athletes, celebrities, artists together for one cause, it's something that made me very passionate."

During a joint appearance on CNN on Sunday, Hart informed Rubin that he and another friend, John Morgan, would donate another \$1 million to the cause and praised Rubin for "doing amazing things. This is just who you are. It's an honor to be your friend and your brother. I love you, dude."

Rubin has a reported worth of close to \$3 billion and said he had "always been a check writer" until Meek Mill – whom he befriended at a chance meeting at an NBA All-Star Game — was given a two-to-four year prison sentence in November 2017 for violating probation. Over the next five months, Rubin was one of Meek Mill's most tireless backers and established the Reform Alliance with Jay Z and Roc Nation CEO Desiree Perez to fight for parole and probation reform within the justice system. Meek Mill was released the same night of a Sixers' playoff game against the Heat in 2018, took a helicopter from the State Corrections Institution in Chester, Pa., and arrived in time to ring the bell. Rubin called the experience a "life-changing moment" for him.

"What happened with Meek really opened my eyes. Being in the court with him in November 2017 and watching one of my best friends going to prison for not committing a crime, it made me realize writing a check isn't good enough. You've got to put your own hard work and energy, sweat and tears into something to really make it what it can become. Honestly, writing a check is easy, but putting your time and energy into something is hard," Rubin said. "He would've been in jail for probably three or four years. I knew I had no choice. He was hopeless on his own. So, knowing that we went all in, and we won that fight. And we turned it into not only getting him out of prison but creating what I believe is going to be one of the most game-changing criminal justice organizations."

COVID-19 has done more than just provide the inconvenience of being a homebody. Rubin said he has personally felt the effect of the coronavirus through friends who have had bouts with it and he also revealed that his 79-year-old mother, Paulette, is currently battling cancer from home and he has been unable to visit her. "I can't see her right now. That's absolutely awful for her to be stuck in her house and it's awful for me not to see her. I don't want to take the chance of giving her corona if that's how she finishes her time on this planet," Rubin said. "Look, do I want to be locked up in my house? No. Neither does anybody else, but what are we going to do? Sit in our house and mope around? Or we can turn this around and turn it into something positive? That's what we're doing."