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A refreshing change of pace for reporter

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I have never had an assignment like this.

Write a feature about an athletic program for children with special needs. I didn't know what to expect, but it seemed fairly straightforward.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

I spent an hour and a half last Monday watching and interviewing volunteers, participants and parents associated with No More Sidelines. It was remarkable.

The group gets together every Monday and Wednesday to play games, socialize and have fun. They currently are in the midst of their softball season.

I can't say the last time I saw more smiles, heard more words of encouragement or felt such an outpouring of joy on a softball field — or any athletic field, court or arena for that matter.

At the events I usually cover, there are clear "winners" and "losers."

One side explodes with jubilation, while the other is left with tears and disappointment.

Here, there were no losers and it was refreshing. There certainly wasn't a shortage of characters on display, either.

There was Matt Andrews, a tiger on the bases, who bravely sacrificed his body for the team, sliding into every bag possible — with shorts on. He dedicated the game to his mom Rhonda and his future girlfriend.

There was Jodeci Grimmatt, a bouncing ball of energy. The 14-year-old Reeths-Puffer student reminded me of Tigger from Winnie the Pooh as he wore a meandering circle around me while answering a few questions.

Sarah Siedenstrang, 17, was impressive on the mound. She told me they call her "flame-thrower" because she has such a good arm. She wasn't kidding.

Erik Baker, 15, sported an A-Rod shirt (courtesy of family from the East Coast) and a "batting" glove. His mother, Sandy Baker, explained that they recently attended a West Michigan Whitecaps game.

"He saw they wore gloves so we just had to go out and get some gloves," she said, smiling and proud. "It is a racquetball glove, but it doesn't matter."

I knew exactly what she meant.

No More Sidelines isn't about winning and losing, because everybody wins. It isn't about who is better, because everyone gets to play. And, by all means, it isn't about the difference between a baseball glove and a racquetball glove, because it is the people that matter most.

Then there was Alivia Blair, the 16-year-old inspiration for all of the love, joy and overwhelming feeling of community I was witnessing.

Alivia's mother Cyndi began the program nearly two years ago with the help of family friend Dawn Dach.

I spoke with Alivia for a moment while the team scrimmaged a group from

Central Assembly of God.

She swayed gently back and forth as we spoke. Her younger sister Courtney stood near, offering encouragement as she quietly spoke to a notepad-toting stranger.

During our brief interaction, I learned Alivia likes softball, but is looking forward to August's soccer season. While we spoke, I couldn't help but wonder what she really thought of all of this. Could she comprehend or appreciate all that her mother, her sister, Dach and all the other volunteers are doing for her and others like her with special needs?

Then I caught myself. She doesn't need to. None of them do.

And I began to see the bigger picture.

No More Sidelines isn't just for children and young adults with special needs. It is for their parents, too, and the volunteers that keep coming back week after week. It is for the betterment of our entire community.

"You only have to be here one night to see what you get," said Cyndi.

I can attest. The memory of my afternoon with No More Sidelines will undoubtedly remain for a while. The positive energies I felt that day still linger.

There was nothing straightforward about this assignment.

And I sure am glad.