

Story

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In the game No More Sidelines is winning endeavor

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Cyndi Blair is tireless.

At least it seems that way.

Blair is a nursing supervisor for Muskegon County. She's been doing it for 17 years. And after a long day of helping and directing people, she relaxes into an evening of helping and directing people.

Blair is the founding director of No More Sidelines, an organization dedicated to the socialization of special needs children and young adults through sports.

The program is free and is open to anyone, "as long as they receive some sort of special needs schooling," said Blair. "It could be physical, mental or emotional. They need to belong."

Blair knows. She has first-hand experience. Her 16-year-old daughter, Alivia, is a special-needs student at Reeths-Puffer.

"She is my inspiration for doing this," acknowledged Blair, who also has three older sons and a younger daughter. "She wanted some friends. With four brothers and sisters, she got dragged to everyone else's stuff. But she knew she wasn't going to her own stuff.

"She also saw the others were having sleepovers and she wasn't. (Special needs children) don't really meet kids. You can't make someone be your kid's friend. But you can set it up for the opportunity."

The desire to help her daughter achieve that social interaction blossomed into a dream to reach the multitudes of special needs families in the area.

Family friend, Dawn Dach, was on board from the beginning.

"She has known Alivia forever," said Blair. "When I first told her about it, she told me, 'If you want to try it, I'll stand alongside of you.'"

Filling a need

No More Sidelines have come along way in just a year and a half.

The program began in January, 2006 with two teams of seven for a night of basketball. It has ballooned into 110 participants, drawing 25-30 kids from Ludington to Grand Haven to Coopersville every Monday and Wednesday.

In this technological age, it appears that word of mouth is driving the growth. That is how Jane Siedenstrang and her daughter, Sarah, became involved last year.

"One of the girls at her high school volunteers (here) and suggested it," said Jane Siedenstrang, whose daughter will be a senior at Whitehall this fall. "We were looking for something. She loves sports, but could never play.

"I can't believe what they do. It has been fantastic for her, making friends and building self esteem. (Plus), they get the social interaction."

Mike Farrell began bringing his 9-year-old son, Jason, at the beginning of summer.

"We were going to sign up for Special Olympics, but they tend to cater to older kids," said Farrell. "This is totally day and night. (Jason) loves it. And Cyndi is great. She had a dream and she followed it. She does everything.

"I am very happy I got involved in this."

Stories like the Siedenstrang's and Farrell's abound. But Blair and Dach know there are so many others that could benefit from a program like No More Sidelines.

"There are 5,000 special needs children in Muskegon County alone," said Blair. "We knew the need was there."

Added Dach, "We need more kids. There are still some out there that we just are not reaching for some reason."

It takes a community

There is always something to do.

Besides practice twice a week, there are fundraising concerns, presentations to give to area organizations and monthly community events to plan.

"We call ourselves the army of two," said Dach, before correcting herself. "We have so many volunteers that we aren't an army of two anymore."

Pioneer Resources, Community Mental Health and The Community Foundation have all provided support. Hope Reformed Church provides the use of its softball field. First Lutheran and Calvin Christian also donate the use of their facilities during basketball season.

Blair estimated that 10 volunteers help out at every practice. But she wants more.

"We have done fairly well with volunteers," said Blair, noting the majority come from area church youth groups and high schools. "But we don't want them to just mentor. We want them to be a part of it.

"We would love to have groups come to scrimmage us. We want competition. These kids don't just want to practice. They want to play."

Momentum is beginning to build. This past week a youth group from Central Assembly of God showed up to scrimmage on Monday. Farrell also put together a group with the help of his co-workers at Midas for a Wednesday scrimmage.

"The idea is for the kids to participate completely in their community," said Blair. "These kids tend to get left out. If the community could experience these kids, they would be able to appreciate them.

"Most people think, 'I know those people.' (After interacting they say) 'I never knew these kids had a personality and are funny.' "

SUBHEAD: Learning as they go

Blair and Dach didn't really know what they were starting. But from the beginning, No More Sidelines embraced a roll-with-the-punches philosophy.

"From the get go there were questions like, 'What if someone showed up in a wheelchair,' " said Blair. "We will figure it out. And we always have.

"It is how you look at it. We had a presentation (recently) and they kept saying, 'But what if...?'. There aren't any rules. And as a special needs parent you never allow your kid to say never."

Farrell pointed out that a child with a walker showed up recently to play softball and the group "figured it out."

"Everybody has their own special need," said Blair. "Some are just more obvious than others."

And that includes the parents.

No More Sidelines has evolved into a support group for families with special needs children. That parents can watch their children play and

interact and having fun in a social setting is icing on the cake.

"The parents have bonded," said Dach. "Instead of just going home after practice, they stay around and mingle."

"I've had some come up to me and say, 'I can come and sit on the bench and cheer my kids on just like anyone else,' " said Blair. "I think the kids sometimes surprise their parents with what they can do."

Sarah Siedenstrang certainly surprised her family.

"I've been the main pitcher the last two years," beamed Sarah after Monday's scrimmage. "I caught five balls in the field last year and have two this year."

"She had never played softball in her life," said Jane Siedenstrang.

"She was good and was the starting pitcher. We were amazed."

The goal is to increase success stories like the Siedenstrangs.

"This isn't my profession. This is my dream," said Blair as moisture began to well up in her eyes. "This is really about making life good for these kids."

No More Sidelines at a glance

- What: Athletic opportunities for special needs children and young adults.
- When: Every Monday and Wednesday throughout the year from 5:30-7 p.m.
- Cost: Free.
- Organizers: Cyndi Blair and Dawn Dach.
- Sports: Rotate about every two months beginning with basketball in January and continuing with track, bocheyball, softball, soccer and bowling. Currently playing softball at Hope Reformed Church, 1878 Evanston Ave. Soccer will begin Aug. 13.
- This weekend: A family picnic on Sunday at the Elks Lodge from 1-5 p.m.
- Fundraiser: A golf outing at Oak Ridge Golf Course on Aug. 4. The cost is \$65 per person.
- Contact info: Call 724-7142 to leave a voice message or reach Cyndi Blair at 206-0289 or Dawn Dach at 740-4389.