



HOOPS AND TROOPS' COACHES HELP OUT

**By Tom Noie
South Bend (IN) Tribune
June 14, 2006**

BRISTOL -- In a home tucked on a quiet cul-de-sac in Elkhart County, off a main road and past a pair of police checkpoints, a group of college basketball coaches gathered Tuesday for a good cause.

By an outdoor putting green in a backyard big enough to hold a football field, Michigan State's Tom Izzo joked with future Big Ten colleague Kelvin Sampson, still settling in at Indiana. Marquette's Tom Crean stood nearby and conversed with a group of people after, like Sampson, leaving his summer camp early for a quick flight into north-central Indiana. On the patio stood Wake Forest's Skip Prosser, not far from Bethel's Mike Lightfoot. Inside, Western Michigan's Steve Hawkins and Stan Joplin of Toledo worked their way through a bunch of basketballs splashed across a pool table and waiting to be autographed.

Word had it that Notre Dame coach Mike Brey and former Irish coach Digger Phelps were en route and that former Irish standout and current Chicago Bulls executive vice president for basketball operations John Paxson might make an appearance.

Eventually, there would be a catered barbecue dinner and, as the sun slipped lower in the western sky, more stories told and laughs shared. In the process, the coaches worked to make sure that U.S. troops stationed thousands of miles away overseas fighting the Global War on Terrorism, and the children awaiting their return, were not forgotten. They came not because they had to, but because they wanted to at a function organized by Jeff Nix, a former Notre Dame assistant basketball coach and current director of scouting for the New York Knicks.

Last season, Nix bought season tickets to Air Force basketball, where his close friend, Jeff Bzdelik is head coach. Bzdelik had the tickets distributed to children whose families are stationed at Fort Carson, the fourth-largest Army post in the world and located near Colorado Springs, Colo.

Bzdelik and Nix now hope to raise enough money through an organization, The Home Front Cares, to send a school bus full of children -- some 1,000 in all -- to every Air Force football and basketball game this season. A small group of invited guests Tuesday were offered a chance to contribute what they could after hearing the college coaches speak.

"What we want to try to do is get the word out that we can help," Nix said. "Let's show interest and support and try to get some coaches in different regions to buy into it, to give these kids a chance to get away for a couple hours and not worry about the phone calls coming in that aren't good."

Bzdelik, as well as several troops, also were in attendance at the home of Nix's friend, Ray Stults. Bzdelik, who also coached in the NBA with the Denver Nuggets, spoke Tuesday of the concern of seeing the kids at Fort Carson when their mothers and fathers leave for combat. Sometimes he sees those same kids when their parents return home. "And not all of them come back," Nix said of the parents in the military.

Izzo and Sampson, meanwhile, spoke of their personal experiences with the war. Both recently returned from seven days of basketball and bonding with troops in Kuwait.

Forget all that time near the front line, Izzo said. Simply spending one hour of one day in Kuwait after 15 hours of travel is enough to change anyone's perspective on lending their support, however small. Izzo was so moved when he first ventured to Kuwait in 2005 that he held a team meeting at 1 in the morning upon his return to campus. Going back a second time this spring meant just as much, especially at night. That's when the men and women whom Izzo spent the better part of an afternoon getting to know in the 117 degree heat climbed aboard their Humvees and depart for battle.

"Watching that convoy head out," Izzo said, "that's a lasting image."

Sampson spoke often of being humbled from his visit. For as much pressure as college coaches feel from alumni, fans and administrators to win games and go to the NCAA Tournament, that increases tenfold when soldiers wake in the morning and spend their days, firearms at their sides, never really certain if they'll return to their bunks that night. "I felt about as insignificant but as honored as I could feel because I felt I was around greatness," Sampson said. "I made myself a better coach, a better person, a better father and a better husband by spending time (there)."

Time was something every coach was quick to offer for Tuesday's fund-raiser. A slice of Sampson wanted to be back in Bloomington with the kids at his camp, but he also knew he had to be in Bristol.

"There's not a thing I wouldn't do for our Army," he said. "They're my heroes."

That sentiment was shared throughout as coaches put aside their early-summer agendas to come together and help the kids of Fort Carson. When Nix called Crean, there was no way the coach could say no, even if he had to hitchhike from Milwaukee.

"It's a lot of fun to be with so many people that this means something to," said Crean, one of the few coaches to slip on a sport coat to the casual gathering that followed an afternoon golf outing. "When you've got people coming from all over, I want to be a part of it." And be a part of it for the right reasons. There were no hidden agendas, no underlying reasons for anyone to give anything more than their time and their support for the one group that matters most in today's world, but one that often gets shuffled into the shadows.

"There's no political angle," Nix said. "This is for the kids. That's all we care about."

COACHES HELP OUT ON THE HOME FRONT

**By Jason McFarley
Elkhart (IN) Truth Staff
June 14, 2006**

BRISTOL -- Basketball coaches from about a dozen schools put their efforts Tuesday behind a single program.

The coaches -- mostly skippers of Division I schools in the Midwest -- gathered for a fundraiser supporting children with Army parents who are stationed at Fort Carson, Colo., but deployed in Iraq.

The event raised enough money for The Home Front Cares charity to send more than 1,000 kids to the nearby Air Force Academy's home football, basketball and hockey games next season, said organizer Ray Stults, who served in the Army during the Vietnam War.

More than 100 local residents and other guests made donations for the chance to socialize at Stults' Bristol home and eat a barbecue dinner with a marquee lineup that included first-year Indiana University coach Kelvin Sampson, Michigan State University's Tom Izzo and the University of Notre Dame's Mike Brey.

About 4,000 soldiers from Fort Carson are serving in Iraq, according to information compiled by organizers. The total will increase to 10,000 in October.

"We can take children's minds off the fact that their moms and dads are being shot at" while serving overseas, Stults said of the fundraiser's purpose.

Stults said that with a friend's help, getting the coaches to participate was easy. "It's amazing, this collection of coaches. These guys never hesitated. People have just dropped everything for the kids."

Daimon Beathea, coach of the first-year Elkhart Express minor-league team, said he viewed the event as a way to give back to the community.

"Anytime you've got an opportunity to help people who aren't as fortunate as yourself, you want to take part in it," he said.

Another coach, Steve Hawkins of Western Michigan University, said he was happy to help, too.

"The coaches' involvement here is to help attract potential donors to all of this," he said.

Since its founding by retired Air Force colonels shortly in 2003, The Home Front Cares has raised about \$400,000 for Fort Carson families, said Brock Strom, vice president of the charity's fund for wounded troops.

The Colorado Springs-based charity also helps wounded servicepeople's relatives pay for trips to visit their injured loved ones and raises money for other needs of military families.

Staff Sgt. William Martin, a recruiter for the Indiana National Guard, attended Tuesday's fundraiser and said the community's backing of the charity is an encouraging sign.

"It shows that people of the United States are showing their support for the military," he said.

ENLISTING HELP FOR A GOOD CAUSE

**By Michael Rothstein
Fort Wayne (IN) Journal Gazette
Saturday, June 10, 2006**

It began as a gesture to help out a new coach at his new job, a token of saying "I support you."

It became a way to help children of military families, who often watch mom or pop disappear for six months. Eight months.

A year.

The children lose a mentor during their formative years. In turn, for the parents who are defending this country, they could give up their lives.

Jeff Nix bought season tickets to help out his friend, Jeff Bzdelik, when he was hired at Air Force and asked Bzdelik what to do with them.

The coach told his friend to donate them to Fort Carson, located southwest of Colorado Springs, Colo. The nation's fourth-largest Army facility in the world, it is the largest employer in the state of Colorado.

This is how the idea was hatched, a charity and foundation formed. A chance to help kids whose needs often go unnoticed in the laundry list of people who could use a little bit to lean on.

"If I was a child, I don't know what I would do if my father is overseas in war and you hear the phone ring in the middle of the night," Nix said.

So this is his way of helping out. The goal of "Fort Carson's Kids" is to raise enough money to pay for 50 season tickets for Air Force football and basketball this season – 50 tickets for 50 kids to attend a game and for a couple hours, forget that mom or dad is a world away getting shot at and defending their nation. For a couple of hours, give the kids enjoyment and smiles they'd otherwise lack.

The goal number is \$28,000 to \$30,000. Raising money, though, is tough, so Nix enlisted his friends – basketball coaches.

Nix is a former assistant basketball coach at Notre Dame and the director of scouting for the New York Knicks. He's inviting those basketball coaches, including Notre Dame's Mike Brey, Indiana's Kelvin Sampson and IPFW's Dane Fife, to a barbecue and golf outing Tuesday to help raise money and awareness for the cause he helped start.

And more than anything, he's hoping it latches on and grows and grows as an organization because kids need help, too.

"We could really network this," Nix said. "If we have a lot of success with what we are doing I can sell this to other schools and give those kids a chance to get away for a couple hours for a basketball game or four hours for a football game and have some fun."

Tuesday's event in Elkhart and Bristol isn't open to the public because, Nix said, they have to start small with this. It's a new organization and they are still learning how to operate. But the cause is real and if there are people interested in meeting Sampson or Brey or Michigan State's Tom Izzo or Marquette's Tom Crean, he'll listen. If you want to make a significant donation and show up, e-mail Nix at jnixer@aol.com and leave a phone number. He'll call you back and discuss the cause with you. He'll explain what it is about and then, if you want to make a donation and come, he'll give you directions.

He's become a full-fledged philanthropist with this – going to corporations and his friends and asking for help. Coaches are busy but all he wants to do is get them in the door. He wants them and the public to hear what Izzo and Sampson – who recently returned from Operation Hardwood, which sent basketball coaches over to coach military teams in the Middle East and to tour the area – say about their experiences.

"The people fighting in our military do not get enough credit," Fife said. "Their children as well for having to go through what they go through. I would like to think it would pick up around the country."

This year, the goal is Fort Carson. Next year, who knows? The ideal plan is to link universities with local military bases and have everyone involved, make this a charity of choice for coaches and athletic departments to latch on to.

"It'll have a positive impact for kids," said Nix, who took an hour out of his schedule at the Orlando pre-draft camp to talk about his cause. "We need to do more of that, especially children of soldiers."

It's a different type of charity. It's one that is new in scope but think about it when you look at your child. Think about it if you couldn't see them for six months because of your job. Then consider you may never return.

Wouldn't you want your kid to at least have a little bit of fun while you're gone? If the answer is "Yes," this is the organization for you.

Among The Coaches scheduled to attend:

Mike Brey, Notre Dame; Tom Crean, Marquette; Dane Fife, IPFW; Steve Hawkins, Western Michigan; Tom Izzo, Michigan State; Mike Lightfoot, Bethel; Stan Joplin, Toledo; Digger Phelps, former Notre Dame coach and current ESPN analyst; Skip Prosser, Wake Forest; Kelvin Sampson, Indiana; Jerry Wainwright, DePaul.

PORTVILLE GRAD HELPS COOK UP FUNDRAISER

**By Jim Melaro
Olean (NY) Times Herald
July 7, 2006**

All Jeff Nix wanted to do was offer a gesture of support for a friend who was about to start a new job.

What it's turned into is one of the nation's largest efforts to support troops serving overseas.

Nix, a 1976 graduate of Portville Central School who went on to play basketball at Canisius and serve as an assistant coach at Notre Dame under Digger Phelps, is currently the Director of Scouting for the New York Knicks.

When former Knicks assistant Jeff Bzdelik was hired to coach at the Air Force Academy, Nix purchased a pair of season tickets for the Academy's home games.

He donated them back to Bzdelik and asked him to distribute them to the children of families stationed at Fort Carson, the fourth-largest Army post in the world located near Colorado Springs, Colo.

Since then, Nix and Bzdelik came up with an idea.

How could they purchase more tickets to offer the same gesture to more children whose parents were presently assigned to posts away from home?

With the help of one of Nix's longtime friends, Ray Stults, who offered the use of his back yard, a spacious expanse located in Elkhart County (Indiana) ... spacious enough to house a Big 10 football stadium, the trio hosted a barbecue.

This wasn't your ordinary run-of-the-mill grilling get-together.

Certainly not with the likes of Tom Izzo (Michigan State), Kelvin Sampson (Indiana), Phelps, Skip Prosser (Wake Forest), Tom Crean (Marquette), Digger Phelps – Mike Brey (Notre Dame), and Steve Hawkins (Western Michigan) on the guest list.

Nix, Bzdelik, Stults and a host of high profile college basketball coaches got together for a little fundraising.

Their efforts helped form The Home Front Cares and their intent was to raise between \$10,000 and \$12,000, enough money to buy enough season tickets to send a whole busload of kids to watch Air Force Academy home games this coming season.

Well, to say the backyard BBQ was a success would be a gross understatement.

In all, the gathering raised \$50,000 enabling the newly-formed charity to buy not only 50 season tickets to the Academy's home basketball games but 50 season tickets to its home football games as well.

"My initial intent was to just show Jeff that I was supporting him in his new job," said Nix. "Then, about two months ago, I told Ray about what I had done.

"Ray had served in the Army and we talked about how children of soldiers serving overseas often times can't afford the simple luxury of attending a game.

"We came up with the idea of hosting the barbecue," said Nix. "At first, we sent invitations out to a handful of coaches that I knew.

"But those guys spread the word and we had a great turnout.

“Some of them, like Tom Izzo and Kelvin Sampson, had just returned from a good will tour to Iraq,” said Nix. “They shared stories about what was going on there, how hard our troops were working for a good cause and how much each of them missed their loved ones back home.

“We even read a letter we’d received from President Bush supporting our idea.

The money just piled up.”

But wait ... there’s more.

“We had such great success with what we did, we’ve looked to expanding the program to help children of troops who are stationed at Fort Bragg and Fort Benning next year,” said Nix. “In the big picture, this is just a baby step.

“The children of all of our soldiers need our support.”

If you wish to make a donation to The Home Front Cares, contact Nix at jnixer@aol