



## **HOOPS HELPS GIVE SMILES TO SOLDIERS' KIDS**

**By Mike DeCourcy  
The Sporting News  
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There aren't many of us who, as children, didn't deal with moments when Dad or Mom wasn't home. Sometimes it was a business trip. Or a late shift at work. Mostly, it didn't matter why they were gone, only that they were gone.

It's got to be a little different if your father or mother is in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Fighting against terrorists.

Trying to stay alive.

In our collective concern about the welfare of those wearing the uniforms of the various U.S. military branches, it is easy to forget many of them have children here whose concerns are far greater than the rest of ours. It's hard to imagine what might ease that worry, if only for a while. Jeff Nix had a small idea, and he's turned it into a big one.

His initial program was called Fort Carson's Kids, which purchased tickets to Air Force Academy athletic events for children of deployed service personnel. As it has expanded to bases and nearby universities around the nation, it has been renamed Camouflage Kids. The new website: [www.camokids.org](http://www.camokids.org).

The "Camo Kids" program has connected bases with colleges in various areas, such as: Fort Benning (Auburn), Fort Bragg (North Carolina, Duke) and the Indiana National Guard (Notre Dame, Purdue, IPFW, Indiana, Valparaiso, Butler). The children invited to attend these athletic events get what amounts to a field trip, with a look at the campus and most often conversations with athletes and coaches included.

A longtime NBA scout, Nix is widely respected in the basketball business. He got the idea when he bought season tickets to Air Force basketball as a show of support when friend Jeff Bzdelik was hired as head coach. Nix decided to give the tickets to the children of service personnel, and quickly thought it'd be nice if still more of those kids could go along.

He asked businessman Ray Stults, who was a U.S. Army Veteran, for some help in building up the program. They held a fundraiser last year at Stults' Northern Indiana home that raised enough money to send about 1,000 children of Fort Carson-based personnel to games.

They're doing fundraising again Tuesday night, at Stults' place in Bristol, Ind. -- the barbecue of the year for those who like a little hoops talk with their sauce. Among those scheduled to attend are Michigan State coach Tom Izzo, Wake Forest coach Skip Prosser, Marquette coach Tom Crean, ESPN analysts Digger Phelps and Mike Ditka, Chicago Bulls GM John Paxson and Indiana coach Kelvin Sampson. Heck, that's just the starting lineup.

Some of those guys -- Izzo, Prosser and Sampson -- have participated in the Operation Hardwood program that sends college basketball figures, mostly coaches, to Kuwait for a week of morale-building (for the troops) and lesson-learning (for those who make the trip). It's no surprise to see them going out of their way to help the children of those they might have met on those visits.

Nix says at last year's Camo Kids fundraising barbecue, the emotional stories some speakers told about their experiences overseas had visitors tearing up -- then ripping up checks and writing bigger ones.

The curative powers of sports have gotten me through some of the most difficult times in my life, so I know there is value to this. The Camo Kids program can't do any more than provide relief for an afternoon or an evening. But it's something.

## **TROOPS AND HOOPS**

### **Coaches gather in Bristol for a good cause**

**By Pat Host  
Elkhart (IN) Truth  
June 13, 2007**

BRISTOL -- There was a gathering of A-list college basketball coaches Tuesday in Elkhart County that would make a basketball Hall of Fame induction jealous.

Oh yeah, "Da Coach" was there as well.

The second benefit gathering for the "Camo Kids -- Support through Sports" program was held Tuesday at the home of Elkhart businessman and U.S. Army veteran Ray Stults in Bristol. The goal of "Camo Kids" is to raise money to support the families of military members in the Middle East. "Camo Kids," formerly known as "Fort Carson's Kids," donates tickets to college athletic events to the children of soldiers called away to active duty.

Notable figures present Tuesday included Indiana coach Kelvin Sampson, Notre Dame coach Mike Brey, Express president and coach Daimon Beathea, former Chicago Bears coach Mike Ditka, Michigan State coach Tom Izzo and Western Michigan coach Steve Hawkins.

"Camo Kids" specifically benefits the children of service members stationed at Ft. Benning (Ga.), Ft. Carson (Colo.) and Ft. Bragg (N.C.). "Camo Kids" partners with the Boys and Girls Clubs of America and eight universities to help provide a positive athletic experience: the U.S. Air Force Academy, Notre Dame, Indiana, Purdue, Valparaiso, Auburn, Butler and IPFW.

The local thread in all of this is Jeff Nix, the director of scouting for the New York Knicks and former assistant basketball coach at Notre Dame under Digger Phelps and John MacLeod. Nix partnered with Stults in '05 to form "Fort Carson's Kids," which was initially created by Colorado head coach Jeff Bzdelik when Bzdelik was coach at Air Force.

Hawkins said he wasn't sure what he was getting involved with when he first heard of "Fort Carson's Kids," but when Sampson and Izzo returned from "Operation: Hardwood" in Kuwait and shared their stories, he didn't hesitate to help out.

"It was a day where you walked out and said -- I know this is going to sound corny, but it's one of those days where you walk out and say, 'It's good to be an American,'" Hawkins said. "It was a very heartwarming experience and as soon as Jeff called me up to organize next year's, I just said 'Count me in.'"

Brey just returned from being part of "Operation: Hardwood" in Kuwait and said he saw teamwork he had never seen before on the court.

"Throughout the week, people are coming up to us saying 'Thanks for coming,'" Brey said. "My response was, 'First of all, we're honored to be here. Thank you for all you do for us.' I think the best example of teamwork that I've ever witnessed is our military in that setting."

Sampson said his trip to Kuwait humbled him.

"You know there is always something bigger than we are in this life and going over to Kuwait really taught me that," Sampson said.

According to "Camo Kids" media contact Bob Nagle, last year's benefit raised \$68,000. There is no set goal for this year's campaign.

Nix, who has been with the Knicks for over a decade, acknowledged how fortunate he is to have such supportive friends.

"It's more than basketball," Nix said. "These coaches are my friends and for them to come and help me out and help Ray out, it means so much."

Izzo said Nix's enthusiasm for "Camo Kids" encouraged him to take the plunge.

"It was something that was passionate for him and -- boom, boom, boom -- he was 100 miles per hour on it," Izzo said.

The A-list gathering of coaches seems like something only a large sports television broadcaster would organize and hold in Manhattan. But Nix, a Granger resident, said it said a lot that all these high-profile coaches would be meeting in Northern Indiana.

"That's why I've made this my home for 20 years. This is home for me, it's always going to be home. The people in Michiana are so generous and compassionate and they know the cause we're involved in."

## ALL ABOUT THE KIDS

### "Camo Kids" receives support from college coaches

By Pat Host  
Elkhart (IN) Truth  
June 19, 2007

"Support the troops" is one of the most politically polarizing phrases in our modern day vocabulary. Pro-war hawks like to use it as a wedge of "either your for us, or your against us," while anti-war doves cry "support the troops -- oppose the war."

Tuesday night in Bristol, "Camo Kids" was about supporting the families of the troops, period. Not just the servicemen and women, but more specifically, the families and children of servicemembers overseas currently fighting in the Middle East. Those specifically fighting overseas, for the most part, have the federal government supporting them while they are fighting -- shelter, clothing, food, etc. But many times, for the families left behind, they don't have the main breadwinner or parental figure behind to support them, and that is what "Camo Kids" is all about.

I understood, generally, what "Camo Kids" was about, but it wasn't until I started talking to those involved that I understood that "Camo Kids" was about supporting the little things.

Little things like Jeff Nix, former ND assistant coach and current New York Knicks Director of Scouting, donating basketball tickets to Air Force games (where his friend Jeff Bzdelik was coaching) for kids at Ft. Carson in Colorado. Little things like bussing kids from Ft. Carson to the Notre Dame/Air Force football game last October. Little things like helping out with the car repairs of a wife whose husband and father of her kids is currently away from home and in Iraq.

Of course, those aren't just little things, those are enormous things to the people whose lives it directly impacted, and the fact that "Camo Kids" has grown from "Fort Carson's Kids," a program benefiting one base into a program supporting four bases with the help from eight schools, that seemed to generate the most pride out of those in attendance Tuesday.

I was more than excited to see the laundry list of A-list movers and shakers from the college basketball world in attendance. I'd be a hypocrite if I didn't admit it. I was excited to see Michigan State coach Tom Izzo, who is one of the nicest guys in sports in general and a Big Ten living legend. It was hilarious to hear Izzo say about former Spartan and current Express president and coach Daimon Beathea: "I coached Daimon for three years as an assistant, and unfortunately, I had to coach him in my first year as a head coach."

It was also my first time meeting Notre Dame coach Mike Brey and Indiana coach Kelvin Sampson. And of course, as a Western Michigan graduate, it was great to shoot the breeze, once again, with Bronco coach Steve Hawkins, who has built WMU into a consistent Mid-American Conference contender every season by stealing all the talent from northern Indiana over the years. A real sly move for a California native, if you ask me. Then again, he is a John Wooden disciple.

And it's not everyday you get to confirm, in person, what an imposing figure Mike Ditka is, even at 67 years old. I can only imagine what a dominating presence Ditka was during his playing and coaching days. Wow. Jimmy Mac just got a whole lot more respect from my end.

The most gratifying part of attending the "Camo Kids" fundraiser was seeing how excited the service people were to be meeting their favorite coaches. I'm just a sports reporter, wielding a tape recorder and a pad and pencil. These people wake up every day knowing they might not come back from their next tour of duty. Like Sampson told me, as he learned from his experience in Kuwait with Izzo as a part of "Operation: Hardwood,"

"Those are real bullets in their guns, those tanks have ammunition in them," Sampson said. "Then you see them get on those 18 (bolt) trucks that have gunner holes up top where someone like you, or younger, is manning those things, trying to protect whoever is driving that truck and the supplies in it."

At first, when I first read the list of coaches to be in attendance: Hawkins, Izzo, Brey, Sampson, Tom Crean (Marquette), John Paxson (Chicago Bulls), Digger Phelps, Brad Stevens (Butler), Skip Prosser (Wake Forest),

Beahea, Homer Drew (Valparaiso), Dane Fife (IPFW), Matt Painter (Purdue), Mike Lightfoot (Bethel), Ditka, Chris Collins (Duke) and Stan Joplin (Toledo), this could easily be a list compiled for a gathering organized by ESPN and held in Manhattan. That would not surprise me in the least. Replace "Camo Kids" with "Jim Valvano Benefit" and I wouldn't have blinked.

But to see such a distinguished group of movers and shakers coming together in northern Indiana for such an impressive cause (taking care of the families of service members and supporting their dear friend, Jeff Nix) was one of the greatest moments of the event for me.

And I know the men and women for whom the fundraiser was specifically for -- the families of our service members overseas -- more than appreciated it as well.

## **JEFF NIX STILL TAKING KIDS TO THE GAME**

**By Jim Melaro  
Olean (NY) Times Herald  
June 5, 2007**

When Portville native Jeff Nix throws a backyard barbecue, one question is sure to be answered:

"Where's the beef?"

In Nix's case, the "beef" is a list of guests that's a who's who of nationally known coaches.

One year ago, the guest list included Jeff Bzdelik, Tom Izzo, Kelvin Sampson, Digger Phelps, Skip Prosser, Tom Crean, and Mike Brey, to name a few.

The purpose of the barbecue was to raise funds for a program which was known last year as Fort Carson's Kids.

The idea then, according to Nix, was to raise money so that the children of soldiers serving our country from Fort Carson could attend football and basketball games involving U.S. Force Academy teams.

To say the fund-raiser was a success would be an understatement.

Last year, Nix's barbecue raised enough money to send more than 1,000 kids to Academy athletic events.

If this year's fund-raiser, which will take place one week from today, is nearly as successful, the children of soldiers serving out of four additional military installations will be able to enjoy the same experience.

"We were pretty aggressive last year in targeting just one base, Fort Carson," said Nix. "This year, my business partner, Ray Stults, said, 'Let's see if we can go bigger.'"

"Well, this year we have 10 schools involved and we'll be able to donate tickets to kids whose parents are serving at Fort Benning (Auburn University), Fort Bragg (Duke, North Carolina), the Indiana National Guard, and the Indiana Marine Corps Reserves (Notre Dame, Indiana, Purdue, Valparaiso, Butler and IPFW) as well as Fort Carson."

This year, the program is called Camo Kids and the guest list includes Mike Ditka and John Paxson.

"This is not just about sending kids to a ballgame," said Nix, who has been employed by the New York Knicks the past 15 years. "Our intention is not to drop them off 30 minutes before the game starts and take them home when it ends.

"Our objective is to give them a full campus experience.

"We drop them off about four hours before game time," said Nix. "And we have different people from the university – sometimes athletes, sometimes students involved in sororities and fraternities, and sometimes school administrators – give the kids a tour of the campus.

"We would like them to understand that academics are very important.

"If we take 200 kids from Fort Benning to a game," said Nix, "and 10 of them come back and say they want to do well enough in school so that they can go back to Auburn as a student, that's what makes this worthwhile."

The phrase Camo Kids came about after Nix met with General Robert Mixon from Fort Carson.

"When you think about it, it means a lot because in a lot of ways, these kids are camouflaged," said Nix. "We want to help them improve their self-esteem.

"A lot of these kids are here while their moms and dads are serving overseas, and all they ever hear is how bad the war is and how people question why we're there.

"We just want to give them a day when they can enjoy the experience of a college ball game and let them know that somebody cares."

Nix, who starred at Canisius after his high school playing days at Portville ended, indicated that he would like to expand even further.

"We've talked about adding Fort Bliss in Texas and Fort Campbell in Kentucky to the cause," said Nix. "And there are some smaller bases located in the northeast that we'd like to include, but we'd really need some help in getting people involved so that we can reach out to them.

"I obviously have a soft spot in my heart for St. Bonaventure, Niagara, and Canisius. If anybody has any suggestions, believe me when I say that we are all ears."

If you would like to make contributions to Camo Kids or contact Nix about his program, go to [www.camokids.org](http://www.camokids.org).

The web site includes a page that can be downloaded with contribution information.

## **COACH SAMPSON PLAYS A BIG ROLE IN SUPPORTING CAMOUFLAGE KIDS PROGRAM**

**June 14, 2007**

**IU Sports - CSTV**

Elkhart, Indiana - One of the first things you notice on the front page of the Web site for Camouflage Kids is the quote at the top of the page. It comes from Indiana men's basketball coach Kelvin Sampson and reads, "There's not a thing I wouldn't do for our Army. They're my heroes."

This past week, Sampson and several prominent sports personalities joined New York Knicks Director of Scouting and project founder Jeff Nix at the home of retired businessman and U.S. Army veteran Ray Stults for a barbecue to raise money for this program.

"Jeff Nix, who coordinates this event, is a long-time friend of mine through the college basketball ranks," Sampson said. "He has been a scout and front office guy for the New York Knicks for a long time. When he called me and told me about it, I wasn't quite sure what it was. Having gone to Kuwait twice, I found out that it was dealing with the children of military personnel that are on active duty and giving them a chance to go out and experience things that normally they would with their mothers and fathers that are deployed in the Middle East. It's just another opportunity to reach out and help."

The program began in 2005 when Nix purchased season basketball tickets to the U.S. Air Force Academy to support Jeff Bzdelik, his friend and head coach. He then donates them to the kids at Fort Carson.

In 2006, Nix and his business partner, Stults, decided to do more for the kids at Fort Carson and hold a fundraising event for The Home Front Cares to purchase tickets to Air Force football and basketball games.

In what proves to be an atypical backyard summer BBQ, a coaching roster including Sampson, Bzdelik, Tom Izzo, Digger Phelps, Skip Prosser, Tom Crean and Mike Brey helps to raise enough money to send more than 1,000 kids to Air Force athletic events.

This year, the mission grows to include the children of Fort Carson, Fort Bragg and Fort Benning, as well as the Indiana National Guard and Indiana Marine Corps. Ten major colleges and athletic departments join in and The Camo Kids cause is born.

Sampson is especially proud of the fact the IU is now on board and the children of soldiers from Indiana will have a chance to see the Hoosiers up close and in person. In 2005 and 2006, Sampson was part of an elite coaching fraternity which participated in the Operation Hardwood Basketball Tournament in Kuwait.

"I am so grateful to have the opportunity to be able to help people in the military," Sampson said. "This is a great opportunity to raise money to help kids. We do a lot for our soldiers, but this is an opportunity to help the children of our soldiers."

At this week's event Sampson, who is joined by Brey, Bzdelik, Crean and Izzo as Division I coaches who are on the Board of Directors, were joined side by side with dignitaries such as Mike Ditka and fellow college coaches Homer Drew (Valparaiso), Dane Fife (IPFW), Steve Hawkins (Western Michigan), Stan Joplin (Toledo), Matt Painter (Purdue), Jeff Reynolds (Air Force), Brad Stevens (Bulter) and Jerry Wainwright (DePaul).

"I'm proud of the other coaches that are participating in this event from Mike Brey, to Tom Crean and Tom Izzo," Sampson said. "This year, they had Mike Ditka coming in. I don't know Mike Ditka, but it tells me a little bit about him that he would be willing to take his time to lend to this event. It's moving, too. We have soldiers that come in and talk about what's it like being away from their families. That just motivates you even more to want to help as much as you can."

To learn more about the program, visit [www.camokids.org](http://www.camokids.org).

## **HEAD COACH STAN JOPLIN TO PARTICIPATE IN CAMOUFLAGE KIDS FUNDRAISER**

**Event will benefit children of soldiers serving our country**

**June 8, 2007**

Toledo, OH - Toledo men's basketball coach [Stan Joplin](#) and some of the biggest names in his sport will take part in the Camouflage Kids fundraising event on Tuesday, June 12 in Bristol, IN. Other coaches expected to take part in the fundraiser include Notre Dame's Mike Brey, Michigan State's Tom Izzo, Indiana's Kelvin Sampson, ESPN's Digger Phelps and Chicago Bulls' general manager John Paxson, to name a few.

"I'm very happy and honored to be asked to participate in this event," Joplin said. "This is a tremendous opportunity to try and raise money for a great cause."

This invitation-only event is to benefit the children of soldiers serving our country. Tickets for college athletic events are donated to the children of soldiers who are called away to active duty. Kids are given the opportunity to visit coaches and student-athletes and tour a campus on gameday.

Last year's event sent over 1,000 children from Fort Carson to the U.S. Air Force Academy to attend athletic events and experience a college campus. This year, the program is being expanded to send children of soldiers from Fort Benning, GA, Fort Bragg, NC, Fort Carson, CO Indiana National Guard and the Indiana Marine Corp Reserve to college campuses such as Air Force, Auburn, Duke, Indiana, North Carolina, Notre Dame and Purdue.

For more information on Camouflage Kids you can go to [www.camokids.org](http://www.camokids.org).

## **COLLINS TO PARTICIPATE IN CAMOUFLAGE KIDS CHARITY EVENT**

**Courtesy: Duke Sports Information**

**Release: 06/07/2007**

DURHAM, N.C. -- Duke men's basketball assistant coach [Chris Collins](#) and former Blue Devil assistant coach Mike Brey, currently the head coach at Notre Dame, are scheduled to take part in a Camouflage Kids ([www.camokinds.org](http://www.camokinds.org)) charity event on Tuesday, June 12 in Bristol, Ind. The event is an annual invitation-only fundraising barbecue to purchase athletic event tickets for children of soldiers at Fort Carson, Fort Benning, Fort Bragg, Indiana National Guard and the Indiana Marine Corps Reserve.

The program was started to give the children of soldiers an opportunity to experience a college campus and athletic event. Camouflage Kids uses a "field trip" experience where the children receive a campus tour and box lunch as well as meet with coaches and athletes.

Formally Fort Carson's Kids, the name was changed with the expansion to additional colleges and military installations. Last year, well over 1,000 children from Fort Carson attended athletic events at the Air Force Academy. This year, 10 schools have contributed tickets for the Camouflage Kids charity.