



Cancer patients shoot with the stars Hoop Dreams gives young survivors a chance to hone basketball skills

Originally published in:

The Herald-Sun

Monday, October 06, 2003

Edition: Final

Page: B1

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A unique marriage of world-class medicine and world-class basketball in the Durham area has produced offspring.

Hoop Dreams Basketball Academy, a basketball skills program initiated with children battling life-threatening cancers at Duke and UNC hospitals, was born this summer as the dream "baby" of former Durham Academy basketball coach Mike Zeillmann, with some special "treatment" by renowned Duke neuro-oncologist Henry Friedman.

Zeillmann, 31, played varsity basketball at Jordan High School and also played at Guilford College before he transferred to UNC, where he ultimately earned a bachelor's degree in history. During his college years, he decided to combine his loves of basketball and teaching children into a part-time business, giving private lessons to youngsters interested in improving their shooting and ball-handling skills.

Even before his 1995 graduation, Zeillmann organized area kindergartners through fourth-graders into the Dribbling Dragons, a group that kept crowds entertained during halftime shows at area college games. While attending UNC, the 6-foot point guard also started working as an assistant coach at Durham Academy, eventually becoming head coach for a couple of years.

But Zeillmann's ultimate hoop dream took an unexpected step toward reality about four years ago, as Friedman joined Zeillmann's growing circle of appreciative parents when the young coach started working with Friedman's athletic daughter, Sara.

"I'm rabid about who I'll expose my kids to," Friedman said. But his friends, Betsy Bisset and her radiologist husband George, vouched for Zeillmann as a skills coach for Sara. Friedman already knew Zeillmann as a coach during son Josh Friedman's days as a student at Durham Academy.

"I was impressed by Mike's ethics, his behavior with the kids, his personality," Friedman said. "He grew up in this community and he has siblings in the area. I've met his parents. And the more I saw what he was doing with Sara and other kids, the more impressed I became."

Zeillmann now coaches Sara, 15, as a member of an Amateur Athletic Union team, the D.C. Starz. "Sara was motivated, and they liked each other from the start," Friedman said. "And I didn't want my daughter being screamed at all the time by some coach in the AAU program." Zeillmann had the qualities Friedman -- and a growing cadre of well-connected friends -- wanted children to have in coaches and role models.

Friedman said the Hoop Dreams idea was made real for him after he and Zeillmann had a heart-to-heart talk.

"I asked him what was his dream," said Friedman, who is known for helping people make such leaps. Usually, however, for Friedman the task involves helping people with deadly cancers to share his optimism and willingness to use new, sometimes highly aggressive therapies. Zeillmann said he's grateful he's never had to face those kinds of personal hardships. But he admires the children who do.

"He said he hoped to some day have a gym, a place in which he could work with children. Finding basketball gyms around here is always a problem. And he said he wanted to incorporate something into his work that would give back to the community. So I said, 'Fine. I can give you a venue.' "

"Sara was in sixth grade when we started working together," Zeillmann said. "I knew Henry was involved in helping people with cancer, and he said he thought we could find some people who would be interested in my kind of program."

Friedman started contacting friends in the area who could help make things happen. They established a nonprofit corporation with a board chaired by Brett Butters, a financial analyst and son of former Duke athletics director Tom Butters. He called Julie Blatt, chief of UNC's Division of Hematology-Oncology, who contacted families of young patients who might be interested in participating in Hoop Dreams.

"We formed a group of people bonded by this notion of sports and children," Friedman said. "I introduced Mike to Bill Jessup, a man about 86 years of age who has given a lot of support to Duke, and whose daughter was one of my patients. He really liked Mike and said he wanted to watch him work with the kids. He came and saw it, and said he loved what Mike was doing -- and offered his support."

Friedman said he, himself, was taking the role of development and public relations officer on the board. Others on the board include Kirk Michel, a former Northwestern football player who owns and operates the Hillsborough House Inn Bed and Breakfast with his wife, Lauri. Their daughter Lindsay is on the D.C. Starz, as is Leigh McAdams, daughter of board member John McAdams, a local developer. Former Duke football

player Anthony Dilweg, now a local real estate developer and co-owner of the University Tower building, is also a board member.

Already the group has optioned a 25-acre site at South Roxboro Street and Martin Luther King Drive, where about 1.5 acres is to be used for constructing the Hoop Dreams gymnasium, assuming soil testing, zoning and other requirements fall into place, Friedman said. He said fund raising has begun for the gym, and Dilweg has pledged to build it at cost.

Meanwhile, Friedman said Duke athletics director Joe Alleva agreed to let Hoop Dreams meet in any available Duke gym until the group's new facility was ready.

Zeillmann, who is paid hourly by the nonprofit, said the goal was to expand beyond the free program for children with cancer challenges. That might include free skills training camps for children with a variety of special needs from a wider geographic area, and paid camps and classes to help pay for the nonprofit activities.

So far, about four brain tumor patients from Duke and two leukemia patients from UNC gather at least once a week to hone basic basketball skills and develop some special tricks, some while dribbling two and three balls at once.

"There's power in learning something like this," said Zeillmann, son of Raymond and Jody Zeillmann, a computer consultant and former Duke nurse, respectively. "One of my girls had trouble bouncing basketballs when she started. Now she's already working with three balls more than 25 dribbles at a time. We try to boost their confidence and make sure they have fun in the process."

Last week, the students got one workout at Cameron Indoor Stadium. Duke women's star Alana Beard joined them, poking playful fun at Zeillmann's inability to beat her in one-on-one competitions. Beard also signed autographs, as did other Duke women's team players as they joined Coach Gail Goesten-kors for a practice session. Goesten-kors' husband, Mark Simons, who recently left a job as Elon University's head basketball coach, helped the Hoop Dreams girls Saturday morning as Zeillmann worked with UNC patients William Smith, 11, of Raleigh and William Jennette Jr., 12, of Mebane.

Both boys have overcome serious health challenges successfully enough to play football on middle school teams. But they, and their parents, are seeing basketball as a more promising athletic endeavor for their high school years.

Kate Shipman, 15, a student at Chapel Hill High School, got a double whammy with a diagnosis of leukemia at 7 years old, followed by pancreas-wrecking therapy that left her diabetic.

"Everybody says exercise, exercise," the ebullient teen said, "but I can't run, and walking is so-o-o bo-r-r-ing. But this is fun. Mike is such a great guy. You can tell him your doctor's or your dad's corny jokes and he'll laugh at them."

Shipman said she sees herself first and foremost as a singer and actress, but she has some interest in sports. She learned to be a Baltimore Orioles baseball fan with her father, she said, but Hoop Dreams has introduced her to basketball in a way that makes it interesting to her for the first time.

"This is a sport I can enjoy doing myself," she said, after a session with Zeillman encouraging her "downward juggling" with three balls at once. Her friend, Emma Peoples, agreed. Zeillman congratulated the former Duke patient, noting that he made a video recording of Peoples' first Hoop Dreams session in which she could bounce two balls a maximum of 10 times. Now, after only a few sessions, she's also bouncing three balls, even incorporating some turnarounds and through-the-legs dribbling.

Terrie Brown sat in the Cameron bleachers watching her daughter, Dana Smith, who turned 15 last week. They carpool to Durham with other Duke patients' families from the Greensboro area every week for Hoop Dreams. Brown said a couple of months in the program have helped Dana regain some coordination she lost since her brain tumor was diagnosed Oct. 12, 1996.

"She played T-ball, soccer, she was getting into basketball and cheerleading," Brown said, "but hadn't been able to do any of that since she was diagnosed. But this program has helped her build strength, eye-hand coordination and, most important, self-confidence and self-esteem. To look at her, you'd never know she had a brain tumor."

"Ever since my illness occurred, I never even considered playing on a school team," Dana said. "But now I'm considering trying out for my high school girls' basketball team next year."

"I'm not an actively observant Jew," Friedman said. "But I believe if you treat people like God wants you to, it all comes around back to you. Mike Zeillmann is a community resource. This is just such a pleasurable thing to do, working with him on this project. It will change the lives of a lot of kids."

"We're not going to be developing a feeder system for the NBA," laughs Zeillmann. "But we can help kids develop some confidence and learn some special things that average kids can't do well."

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