

Court and spark

KATE SHIPMAN, Dana Brown, and Erica Gunter are teenagers who share a skill they're pretty proud of: They can all dribble two or three basketballs at a time. They can even combine that feat with turnarounds and through-the-legs maneuvers. Something else the girls have in common makes their skill on the court all the more remarkable: all are being treated for brain tumors.

Kate, Dana, and Erica are among the young brain cancer patients who have discovered new wellsprings of self-confidence, coordination, and fun through Hoop Dreams Basketball Academy. A basketball skills program designed for children battling life-threatening illnesses at Duke and UNC hospitals, Hoop Dreams is the brainchild of former Durham Academy basketball coach Michael Zeillmann—known affectionately to his charges as Coach Mike or Coach Z—and Duke neuro-oncologist Henry Friedman, MD.

"There's power in learning something like this," says Zeillmann. "One of our 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 the kids' confidence and make sure they have fun in the process."

Zeillmann, 31, played varsity basketball in high school and college and has long combined his love of basketball and teaching by coaching and mentoring kids seeking to improve their

skills. While serving as coach at Durham Academy a few years ago, Zeillmann met and began mentoring Friedman's daughter, Sara.

"I was impressed by Mike's ethics, his behavior with the kids, his personality," Friedman recalls. "And the more I saw what he was doing with Sara and the other kids, the more impressed I became." So, during a one-on-one talk one day, Friedman asked Zeillmann what his dream was.

As chief of neuro-oncology at Duke, Friedman knows a lot about helping people stay focused on their dreams, rather than the daunting obstacles that are often in their way. Besides his family (with his wife, Joanne Kurtzberg, MD, chief of the Duke Pediatric Stem Cell Transplant Program, he has two kids) and fighting brain tumors, he counts basketball as his third driving passion.

So when Zeillmann said that he hoped to some day have a gym where he could work with children and give something back to the community, Friedman saw a unique opportunity. He quickly went into action, contacting friends in the area—including several Duke alumni and parents who are now successful business owners—who could help make things happen. Together, several of them established a nonprofit corporation that would lay the groundwork for Hoop Dreams. "We formed a group bonded by this notion of sports and children," Friedman says.

The Hoop Dreams leadership optioned a 25-acre site at South Roxboro Street and Martin Luther King Drive, where they plan to build a dedicated gymnasium for the program. Fundraising for the facility has begun, and Hoop Dreams board member Anthony Dilweg, a former Duke football player who is now a



Coach Michael Zeillmann (center) teaches young patients new tricks through the Hoop Dreams program.

local real estate developer, has pledged to build it at cost. Meanwhile, Duke Athletics Director Joe Alleva agreed to let Hoop Dreams meet in any available Duke gym, including Cameron Indoor Stadium, until the group's own facility is ready.

Currently, 19 children with life-threatening illnesses, including 13 patients from Duke with brain tumors, leukemia, sickle-cell anemia, and other diseases and 6 leukemia patients from UNC, gather at least once a week to hone basic basketball skills and develop some special tricks. Sometimes Zeillmann gets help from guest coaches, such as former Elon University head basketball coach Mark Simons, who is married to "Coach G," Duke women's basketball coach Gail Goesten Kors. Sometimes the kids are joined by members of the Duke teams, who give them good-natured mock competition and sign autographs to boot.

In coming years, Hoop Dreams may expand to include free skills training camps for special-needs children from a broader geographic area, as well as paid camps and classes to help pay for the nonprofit activities.

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

If you are interested in helping Hoop Dreams fulfill its mission, please contact the program at 919-479-6069 or send an e-mail to: info@hoop-dreams.net. For more information, visit www.hoop-dreams.net.

