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## THE HEART OF THE GAME

a program for kids with cancer builds confidence, friendship for area children

by Mike Corey

Six children are spread out in the IM building on a Saturday morning in mid-January. Their coach, Mike Zeillmann, pairs them off and dispatches each group to a designated basket.

"We're playing 'Around the World,'" Zeillmann bellows. "You remember this game from last week?"

The children nod in understanding, as a member of each pairing takes a basketball and toes the right block in front of his or her hoop.

Zeillmann announces that play will begin in 10 seconds, five seconds, one second, as conversations cease and concentration settles in.

Ideally, Around the World is very simple, as one person is the shooter and the partner is the rebounder and passer. The scheme is working for most everyone, except 15-year-old Katie Shipman. Rather than collecting the errant shots of her teammate, her attention is lured by the photographer snapping her photos. So instead of participating in the drill, she approaches the camerawoman and casts a joke.

"Do you know who invented hospital gowns?" Katie says. "Dr. Seymour Butts."

The photographer pauses, then chuckles and introduces herself. Katie, whose brain tumor was first discovered by doctors at the age of seven, then proposes to tell a few blonde wisecracks. The photographer, of course, is a redhead.

"I don't normally tell these, but a smart blonde told them to me so it's okay," Katie explains.

As Katie entertains her latest audience, the game continues. The athletic abilities of the five other children on the floor vary from Kevin Lynch, who can dribble two balls with his eyes closed while moving around with ease, to a trio of girls that is still attempting to master the art of dribbling with their fingertips rather than their palms. They're supposed to be shooting, but Zeillmann takes a moment before kindly instructing them to return to their baskets. As the hour-long session rolls on, the kids of Hoop Dreams will participate in a few other shooting drills, none of them too intense nor competitive, and they'll do so laughing and carousing throughout.

The sessions are actually very well-run, very organized and very productive. But they do not originate as such, as Zeillmann meets with every new participant individually to have the chance to get to know them and to assess their widely varying abilities. Consequently, Zeillmann can more efficiently run the group sessions once the children are ready to graduate from the individual meeting because he can appropriately match up the kids. And any discrepancies or lack of basketball ability is soon nullified, either with vast improvement, or the realization that the sport itself is of little consequence--it is the purpose of the game that is critical.



BETSY McDONALD/THE CHRONICLE  
Katie Shipman of Chapel Hill has undergone at least 10 major surgeries in her fight against cancer.

"I actually had the opportunity to coach in college, but I always liked working with kids," Zeillmann says. "They learn so fast, they're so passionate about it.... You can see how much they love playing. Almost everything I've learned in my life I've learned through basketball. And basketball is just my way of helping them improve their life."

Katie's life is one that has been improved greatly by Zeillmann and Hoop Dreams. Remarkably articulate and loquacious, she speaks with a confidence and a humor that is perhaps surprising for an individual that has been through so much at such a young age.

"Kate had nine or 10--I've lost count, frankly--surgeries, mostly to do with her shunt, because her tumor was not operable," Katie's father, Neil, says. "[She has had] two surgeries for double-vision, there were side effects from the radiation, [the doctors had to] manipulate the muscles to try to straighten her eyes back out. She's been in the hospital more times than I can count--three major hospitals. She had thirty consecutive days of radiation; she had a reaction to the radiation that caused severe brain swelling, which caused her to sleep for nearly two months, in which time everybody in the family thought she was dying, including her I think."

But now, having been deemed a "survivor" two years ago, Katie cherishes this basketball group, Hoop Dreams. She, like most of the other children participating in today's session, learned of the program through a cancer support group at Duke Medical Center.

"I love it, it's great," Katie says. "Before doing this I was never, like, very physically active. And for all of my medical things, I really need to exercise, so my parents and doctors always say, 'You need to exercise, you need to exercise, you need to exercise.' So doing this really gave me an outlet to find a way to an exercise that I loved doing and I can do with my friends who have gone through the same kind of medical crap that I have."



JENNY MARRON/THE CHRONICLE  
Coach Mike Zeillmann explains a ball handling drill to a group of children during a Hoop Dreams session.

The advantages of this new social milieu are conspicuous to her father, as well.

"She just overall seems more relaxed when she's around these kids; she's not trying to compensate for any of her deficiencies from radiation or anything like that because she knows they all have the same set of problems."

It is in this social regard where Hoop Dreams provides a very necessary therapy, one that even the best doctors at Duke Hospital simply cannot provide. And having a coach that understands the healing power of friendships and basketball has helped to make this program an enamored one.

When Zeillmann ran the first session in October of last year, however, he was unsure how well Hoop Dreams would be accepted.

"I had never really known that many kids that had had cancer and had been recovering, so I was a little apprehensive," Zeillmann says. Some of the kids were nervous, too, as many of them had never even picked up a basketball before.

But not Katie.

"I never get really nervous about stuff like that--even surgery.... I figure you're asleep for the worst part. I learn to look at the bright side of everything."

Such optimism proved to be contagious for Zeillmann, the children and the parents, many of whom attend the Hoop Dreams sessions to get a glimpse of the wonder of the program.

"And then we had that first day with some girls [and it ended up being] great. One of the greatest things about it was you could tell the parents were absolutely thrilled about it, too. It's obviously extremely tough on the kids, but in some ways it's almost worse for the parents to see your child like that. When we started doing it the kids were smiling and having a good time,

to see their parents just so excited that their kids were happy."

The noticeable changes in the attitudes and personalities of their children--increases in self-confidence, attentiveness and morale--have all been cited as outcomes of their children's participation in Hoop Dreams. But the challenges for these kids are far from over.

"It's so depressing," says Terri Brown, the mother of 15-year-old Dana Smith, who survived a bout with cancer after being diagnosed in October 1996. "Every weekend it's like everybody's making plans, going on dates or going to the movies and Dana's like, 'Well I don't know who to call.' These children seem to lose the ability to make friends, and that's not something you can teach people. So this is a common ground where they can bring all these kids together by a basketball and by interacting while learning."

In that respect, Zeillmann has become much more of a coach, as he talks to the children about "everything--they tell me about school and things like that."

His advice is sought by these children, and he provides as much of it as he can while still teaching them the fundamentals of basketball. This is admittedly difficult, but Zeillmann believes that by being an encouraging teacher and role model, he can help to create an atmosphere conducive to the needs of kids like Katie and Dana. Thus far, it's working wonders.

"I've made a lot of new friends," Dana says, "and it's something different because I never thought I'd be able to do this kind of thing again."

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