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SPORTS

February 17, 2004

Hoop Dreams

by Mike Corey

Dr. Henry Friedman is, admittedly, a very simple man—the renowned pediatric oncologist's life revolves around his family, his profession and his favorite sport, basketball.

So perhaps it should have come as little surprise two years ago when Friedman approached his daughter's basketball skills coach, Mike Zeillmann, with a rather simple idea: to create a free program for kids with from cancer to learn and play basketball.

Zeillmann, who has worked with players of all ages and abilities ranging from Kindergartners to Duke's women's basketball team, immediately agreed to serve as the program's head coach. His first responsibility was to contrive a befitting appellation. For this he derived inspiration from one of his favorite films, Hoop Dreams. And though the situations of the young people in both scenarios are decidedly different and unique, Zeillmann believed the phrase "hoop dreams" perfectly captured the essence and goal of the program—to get the children to "start to think differently, to think, 'Maybe I can do this. I'm not going to let my illness limit me. I can step out of the box and try something new.'"

The crux of the program, then, was to provide opportunities for children to be normal, to have an outlet from the mental strains of living with cancer, and to allow for a social setting conducive to friendship, confidence-building and basketball. The physical home of the proposal was a Hoop Dreams facility, comprised of two-and-a-half courts that would serve as a fully-functional basketball mecca for the city of Durham. It would provide a place for basketball instruction and interaction open to the entire community, with an emphasis on those children with cancer and other medical problems.

Understanding that the construction and organization of that facility would take significant resources, Friedman sought out people to help make Hoop Dreams a reality, including Bill Jessup, a 1939 Duke alum and a long-time supporter of the University.

"Dr. Friedman is a very good friend of mine," Jessup said. "He was my daughter's oncologist when she was stricken with a brain tumor some years ago. And we became very close, very good friends. Dr. Friedman approached me a couple of years ago with this idea, and it appealed to me very much.... I was very impressed with the idea so I said, 'I'm on your side, let's go for it.'"

Jessup then made a "rather large pledge", which was complemented by additional



BETSY MCDONALD AND JENNY MARRON/THE CHRONICLE
Led by Dr. Henry Friedman and basketball skills coach Mike Zeillmann (below), Hoop Dreams--a program with the primary intention of helping children with cancer--has found a home on Duke's campus. The medicine? The joy of basketball.

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support from former Duke quarterback Anthony Dilweg, and Bret Butters, the son of former athletic director, Tom Butters. "It all came together," Friedman said.

But rather than waiting for the Hoop Dreams facility to be constructed, Friedman went to Duke's athletic director to expedite the beginning of the Hoop Dreams program.

"I basically went to Joe [Alleva] and said, 'This is my idea, can you provide us with gym space until our facility is built?' Joe loved it and said, 'Count me in, our gym is open anytime you need it.'"



So with a growing list of supporters and sufficient court space at their disposal—Card Gym, Wilson Gym and the IM Building would all be available—Hoop Dreams merely needed to find children willing and able to participate in a casual and educational basketball setting. This would not be a typical sport academy such as those attended by the nation's most ambitious athletes. On the contrary, this would be a completely unique school of therapy and of friendship, with a lesson plan defined by the understanding and joy of basketball.

Through Friedman's efforts, then, children from both Duke and North Carolina's hospitals were notified of the program. The kids that were eligible for participation had to be physically able to participate, and though a long-term goal was to accommodate large numbers of children, only a small number would be allowed to join Hoop Dreams in the program's early stages, thereby allowing Zeillmann—and more importantly, the kids—to adjust.

Four of the inaugural came from a support group headed by Nancy Butters—the wife of the former athletic director—for children suffering or recovering from cancer.

"We had a group of girls who had been participating in a group that met once a month, and really we were trying to meet their needs, kind of pre-teen girls who were early-on diagnosed with brain tumors and had missed a lot of their growing-up years."

The group had been coming together and discussing "normal teenage issues" for about three years, until the time came when Butters and her associates "felt like we'd already met most of their needs." That time coincided with the beginning of Hoop Dreams, and because those girls had no intention of ending their regularly scheduled engagements, they all agreed to attend the first Hoop Dreams session and give it a try—together. Such is the ultimate goal of Hoop Dreams.

"We're trying to give children the ability to realize their dreams..." Friedman said. "These kids' dreams are just to make a friend, be able to go to school without getting laughed at, to look in the mirror and think that they are as worthy for any of the goodness in life that their peers have who don't have these cancers or these other problems. Their wants are pretty simple. This gives them the ability to achieve."

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