



Hoop Dreams: Kids with Cancer Got Game

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There is no doubt about it, Mike Zeillmann has game. And children fighting cancer are getting the benefits.

Zeillmann has played college basketball, coached high school teams at Durham Academy and a girls' Amateur Athletic Union team known as the D.C. Starz. But nothing about coaching has struck at his heart like working with children who are battling with cancer yet still want to play the game.

"I adore working with kids, but I've never done anything like working with kids who have cancer," said Zeillmann, who runs the Hoop Dreams Basketball Academy in Durham. "I never thought it would be this rewarding. The experience has been phenomenal."

Zeillmann coached at Durham Academy before starting his Academy for private skill lessons two years ago. One of his AAU players, Sara, is the daughter of Dr. Henry Friedman, a neuro-oncologist at Duke University. Friedman helped set up a nonprofit corporation after being impressed by Zeillmann's coaching skills and determination to help children.

Working in partnership with UNC Hospitals, Zeillmann began offering coaching this past summer to children struck by cancer. Players were referred to him by Julie Blatt, who heads the Division of Hematology-Oncology at UNC. He now has worked with five girls and five boys, several of whom are afflicted with brain tumors. One is fighting leukemia.

Zeillmann has big plans for Hoop Dreams in addition to working with cancer patients. The foundation's board is led by Brett Butters, son of Tom Butters, a former athletic director at Duke. Brett's wife, Nancy, also is involved in the program. Hoop Dreams plans to build a gym where Zeillmann can work full time.

“Finding time in gymnasiums is difficult,” Zeillmann said. “We want to get our own gym started.”

The academy already has received pledges of \$500,000 and has an option on 25 acres of ground. Anthony Dilweg, a former Duke football player and now a real estate developer, is a member of the board and has pledged to build the gym at cost. Also on the board is Kirk Michel, a former Northwestern University football player who owns a bed and breakfast in Hillsborough. His daughter, Leigh McAdams, plays for Zeillmann’s AAU team. John McAdams, a developer, also sits on the board and has a daughter, Lindsay, who plays for the Starz.

Zeillmann wants to reach out to other children with other health problems as well. He said he would always have a special place in his heart for one of the girls fighting cancer who had trouble even bouncing a basketball when she started. “Now,” he said proudly, “she can dribble three at a time.”

Contributions to the program can be sent to Hoop Dreams Basketball Academy, c/o Kirk Michel, P.O. Box 880, Hillsborough, NC 27707. You can reach Hoop Dreams Basketball Academy at 919-479-6069. For further information, call 919-668-6422 or email Nancy Butters at butte004@mc.duke.edu
— Rick Smith