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[Home](#) / [sports](#) /

A league of their own

By Eddie Daniels

There's a bit of irony when you find out where Russ Oberbroeckling was raised.

Oberbroeckling, a financial adviser for The American Financial Group and past president of The Greater Temple Terrace Chamber of Commerce, is originally from Dyersville, Iowa, where the motion picture "Field of Dreams" was filmed.

Considering the joy Oberbroeckling, 48, has brought to dozens of families in the Tampa Bay area, it's only fitting he's managed to create his own field of dreams through his program, Buddy Baseball.

Buddy Baseball is a league for boys and girls age 7 to 18 with special needs. While batting, running the base paths and playing defense, the player is assisted by a buddy, who is a volunteer typically about the same age.

The program was brought to the Tampa Bay area by Oberbroeckling in 2009 after he called his sister, Sheri White, who brought the program to families in Rockford, Ill.

"I was just so impressed by the league," said Oberbroeckling, who moved to Tampa 26 years ago. "I was reading the e-mails of parents' gratitude who were touched by it and I go: This needs to be all over the place."

Soon after getting the particulars from his sister, Oberbroeckling approached the Temple Terrace Parks and Recreation Department. Within five minutes of that meeting, the department was onboard.

The program, played on a softball field inside the Temple Terrace Family Recreation Complex, has grown from six teams to 10, each carrying six players on the roster. Also growing is the number of buddies. They outnumber the players in the league.

There was nothing to prepare Jim and Jenny Carlstedt for the raw emotions that would overwhelm them last fall.

During the first season of Buddy Baseball during the Fall of 2009, their son Andrew, scored a run from third base.

"I just remember seeing the look on his face as he stepped onto home plate with his buddy," Jim Carlstedt said. "He goes, 'We scored!' He was jumping up and down and they ran back into the dugout."

That moment left Jim and Jenny Carlstedt in tears.

Seems a simple enough act for any kid in America playing baseball, but Andrew Carlstedt is different. The 11-year-old has Sandifer Syndrome, a gastrointestinal condition causing upper body spasms and forcing him to lean at times. That's in addition to his Asperger's Syndrome, a high-functioning form of autism.

None of that matters during Buddy Baseball.

"You don't strike out, you have a buddy and it's fun," Andrew Carlstedt said when asked what was the most exciting part of playing in the league. "Just taking off after I hit a ball."

What's also taking off is the bond experienced by many of the parents involved with the program.

"What's cool is, (for) our parents, it's more social for them," Oberbroeckling said. "They're meeting other parents in similar situations and they're making friends with the parents of the buddies and players. ... It's not just chit-chat. Some are having real friendships."

Not only are friendships being formed, but parents - some for the very first time - are seeing their children transition into independent people right in front of them.

"You leave here and your heart just smiles with how great everybody is," Jenny Carlstedt, 45, said. "With kids who have difficulties, you have to celebrate the small victories and this gives us something to celebrate."

"This is not a small victory. This is a huge victory," Jim Carlstedt, 46, said. "Just to see the look, not only the joy on our faces, but all the parents and the joy on his face."

For information, visit www.buddybaseball.org.

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