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Program scores a home run

By JOYCE MCKENZIE | jmckenzie@tampatrib.com

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TEMPLE TERRACE - It's not unusual on any give day to see Zachary Mueller, 15, decked out in his Buddy Baseball T-shirt.

"He loves it," said his mom, Kim. "In fact, we were in the Chicago airport recently when both Zachary and his dad (Dennis) had their matching shirts on and somebody asked us what this Buddy Baseball thing was all about."

The noncompetitive program, set to begin its third season on Oct. 9, is based at the Temple Terrace Family Recreation Complex. It is open to boys and girls with special needs age 7 to 18 throughout the Tampa Bay area. Players are matched with buddies age 10 to 18 who guide, protect and cheer them on by way of hollers and high-fives.

Launched last October, its founder, Russ Oberbroeckling, a financial adviser and father of two nondisabled daughters, got the idea from his sister Sheri White, who inaugurated a similar league in Rockford, Ill.

The past two seasons have had six teams of six players each and earned Oberbroeckling accolades from the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, the Temple Terrace chamber and the Hillsborough County school district. The program also has caught the attention of a number of committed supporters who have formed a board of directors with Oberbroeckling at the helm.

Oberbroeckling expects to double the enrollement this season.

Zachary, a Temple Terrace resident who has Down syndrome and has been involved since the program's inception, can't wait for the fall season to begin.

"There aren't many things for kids with special needs, especially locally, and I think it makes him feel, for lack of a better term, like a typical kid," Mueller said. "It also makes him feel more involved in the neighborhood and at school (Greco Middle) because he sees his buddies in the hallways."

Mueller said that whenever the family has company Zachary takes them into his room so they can see his Buddy Baseball trophies.

"He's proud of himself and that's what it's all about," she said.

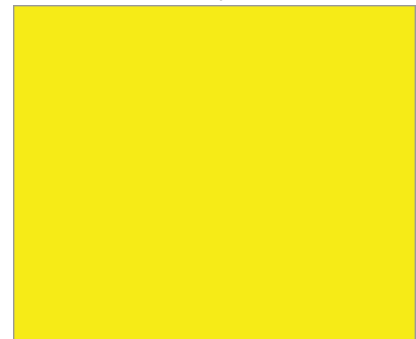
Kim Larochelle's son, Levi, 10, of Tampa is also set to begin his third season with the league.

"The people involved are all heroes and I admire Russ so much for taking his time to fulfill a need for these children," said Larochelle, who noted that without the program Levi, who has Asperger's syndrome, a form of autism that impairs his social development, would never have been allowed the chance to participate in organized sports.

"This was the only answer," she said. "He's gained a lot of confidence and, best of all, he's able to have a good time."

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Larochelle is also grateful to Levi's doctor, Nelson Mané, for introducing her to the program and sponsoring a team. She also commends his two teenagers for serving as buddies.

"Another thing that is so heartfelt to me is the benefit of the buddies," she said.

Temple Terrace resident Aidan Bursten, 11, the son of Peter and Mindy Bursten, has been delighted to be a buddy during previous seasons and looks forward to filling that role for a third year.

"I like being able to help kids with disabilities," Aidan said. "I really like baseball and I play it myself so to be able to share my love of the game with someone who is less fortunate is wonderful."

Mindy Bursten said Aiden takes his responsibility seriously. He's committed, caring and sensitive to his buddy's struggles in life.

"It's a beautiful thing to watch," she said.

Licensed social worker Kerry Brown, who grew up with a sister with special needs, has volunteered with the league since it started and now serves on the board. His role, he said, is to help address psychological issues that may arise regarding players, buddies and coaches.

"I think Buddy Baseball is an awesome concept," he said. "It's just incredible to watch the joy and excitement on the faces of these kids who otherwise would be excluded from participating in sports."

Oberbroeckling looks forward to another season and is hopeful more businesses and organizations will consider sponsoring teams at \$250 each or give donations.

"Buddy Baseball has allowed friendships to form and social barriers to be broken down," he said. "I encourage everyone to come out this fall to watch a game and see the impact this program has had on these kids, the buddies and their families."

The fee per player is \$45; buddies participate for free. Parents may log on to www.buddybaseball.org for information and to print out registration forms for both players and buddies. The forms can be mailed along with a checks or money orders, if applicable, to Buddy Baseball Inc., 639 Gillette Ave., Temple Terrace FL 33617. Forms may also be dropped off at the recreation center.

The time for the Oct. 2 meet-and-greet for players, buddies, parents, coaches and other volunteers is yet to be determined, but should be posted within the next few weeks on the league's website. Call (813) 416-5742 for information.

Reporter Joyce McKenzie can be reached at (813) 731-8026.



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