

ALUMNI GIVING BACK IT'S THAT SIMPLE

BY PAUL MOORE



It started as a way to try to address a simple need: more and more Minnetonka kids were playing ball, but there weren't enough ball fields for them to play on. And when they got to high school, the field they did have was sub-standard. And so, the Minnetonka Diamond Club sprang to life.

Fast forward about four years and you'll see Minnetonka's young baseball, football and softball players enjoying the results. There's Veterans Field, a sparkling multi-use park that not only serves as the Skippers baseball team's home field, it hosts other youth baseball games all summer and youth football in the fall.

There's also Legacy Fields, a four-field softball complex for all levels of play, including the high school girls team.

But how do you raise money for \$4.4 million in projects that give kids a great athletic experience while pumping up pride throughout the community? You find dozens of dedicated volunteers who get as much out of the work as their community gets from them.

It all started with Jim Peck's vision years ago. In 2003, Jon Guy and Chris Farni reignited that vision and brought to the table all the baseball organizations in the community. With the support and encouragement of Superintendent

Dennis Peterson, they reached out to MHS Head Football Coach Dave Nelson, Tonka Youth Football and the softball association. "I still have the drawing of the first sketch we made of the field," Farni recalled. "We knew two football fields could fit and with synthetic turf it would always be playable."

"We're a group of people who are driven and want to give back. It's that simple," says Frank Kuzma ('79),

current president of the Diamond Club. "We were down cooking hamburgers at Legacy last year, and there was a tournament going on at Veterans. There was a tournament going on at Legacy, and there was something going down on the football field. We were standing in the middle of it. Watching all of this—that wasn't there three years ago—that's as rewarding as it could be for all of us."

"We've got baseball, softball and football working together, fund raising together, and we're more effective together than we were individually. There was no way any one entity could do what was done; we had to pull together."

"Volunteer work is the ultimate form of teamwork," says Charlie Kanan ('69), an experienced business executive who volunteers as the club's chief operating officer. "Nobody is as smart as all of us put together. And if you're an alumnus, there's really a huge satisfaction to be able to give back to the school that helped you.

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MINNETONKA DIAMOND CLUB HALL OF FAME

Jim Hanus
Bud Leake
Nancy (Palm) Countryman '59
Jim Peck



Minnetonka Diamond Club members: From left to right: Front- Frank Kuzma ('79), Nancy Countryman ('59), Charlie Kanan ('69). Second Row- Denise Swanson, Chris Pelletier, Kevin Hoy ('79), Brian Tichy, Holly Olson. Third Row- Rich Landa, Kyle Heitkamp, Ron Kamps, Mark Williams, Chris Farni.

PHOTO BY: GREG HEIGESON

You're giving back to a place that helped mold you as a person, and that's something special."

Nancy (Palm) Countryman ('59) has spent 42 years volunteering her time for Minnetonka's youth, primarily at Bennett Family Park, which was an early donor to the Diamond Club. "We all work together," she says. "We needed more space for the older boys and the girls softball players, and the club came through. We are a very fortunate community." (Last year, the Diamond Club created a Hall of Fame, not to honor athletes, but to recognize longtime volunteers. Not surprisingly, Nancy Countryman was one of its first inductees.)

So far the Diamond Club has paid back about a third of its debt, and is positioned to pay \$343,000 a year for ten years to cover the rest. It raises money through annual fundraisers, selling advertising space at the fields and old fashioned requests for donations. Veterans Field got a big boost from the Cambria Corporation, which made a sizeable donation and chose to use field naming rights to honor veterans. Once the project's debt is paid off, the club can look to utilizing the money it brings in for just about anything that helps kids.

"We have a great renewable, repeatable financial resource here," says Kuzma. "Once we get these facilities paid for, the outreach possibilities are endless. For example, we're starting to find ways to create scholarships for kids. People don't realize how many families there are in need in Minnetonka."

Kanan agrees. "Our goal is to create a sustainable growth model," he says. "I'd like to see the Diamond Club, for a long term goal, create ongoing fundraising mechanisms, so that whoever takes it over can raise \$500,000 a year or more. That's money that can be put back into our schools and community for whatever the need is at that time. And I think that's well within our reach."

"We have people on our board say to us, 'You just don't see people as proud of their high school as you guys are....' People here are rallying, while other school districts are cutting programs and funding. This community continues to find a way, through the businesses and individual contributions, to create excellence for our kids."

So what was born out of a basic need for space has turned into something so much more—something more akin to community building. MHS is really a community gathering place, and the residents and alumni are more than happy to help.

"Volunteerism lets you put into motion all of the things you learned as a kid," says Kanan. "The things your teacher told you, the things they talked about in church, the things your parents taught you. The benefits you receive are amazing and they last a lifetime. Plus, there's nothing better than watching kids have a great experience—playing outside, having fun, and enjoying childhood with family and friends." What a great community in which to raise a family.



FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT DIAMOND CLUB PROJECTS, VISIT www.minnetonkadiamondclub.org.

Learn more, get involved or contribute to their fund raising efforts!



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