

SAVE THE BOBCATS

BY CAROLE BARTOO

Trouble for a youth football league turned out to be the perfect opportunity to improve the strength of the bond that exists between two very different communities: Vanderbilt and East Nashville.

Football games on crisp fall nights are like food and water for the neighbors who live in the McFerrin Park area—essential. So when the East Nashville Bobcats were told their league might have to fold, it was very bad news.

"I worried the kids would not have anything to do any more. This league united the whole community—even families not in the program would come out and watch the games," said Coach Ronald Ballet.

The Bobcats have two decades of history in a mostly disadvantaged East Nashville neighborhood. For more than 20 years players in four age groups, starting at age 5 on up to 12, have filled the spectator seats with parents, grandparents, extended family and friends. Sisters are the cheerleaders and every team has volunteer coaches and a "team mom."

Last spring, all of that was in danger

when their sponsor ran out of money and had to drop the team.

"The coach walked into our clinic saying that that someone had told him we could help," recalled Robert Miller, M.D., associate professor of Medicine, who is the mentor and medical director of the Shade Tree Clinic, a free clinic, run by volunteer Vanderbilt University medical students. The Bobcats' practice field lies literally out the back door of the clinic.

"We knew that the team was vital to the community. When you see the kids playing with the support of hundreds of parents, it is important to the community," said Miller.

On Saturdays, students would step outside the clinic's double-wide trailer and into a football rally.

"I came out after seeing patients and every Tuesday night was practice night and Saturday was game day. It was one

big, barbecuing, neighborly party," said Adam Wegner VMSII, student co-director of the clinic. "We really got into watching the games and cheering the teams on."

Any Tuesday evening practice showcased what the neighborhood wanted to protect and preserve: the chance to play. Miller says deciding to help was a no-brainer.

"I knew it would not be insurmountable for Vanderbilt and of all the things we've done in this neighborhood, this would be the one that builds the most trust," Miller said.

Within a couple of weeks, faculty and fans from the very highest levels at the Vanderbilt University Medical Center wrote out their checks. Helmets alone cost \$55 for each boy, to outfit 100 players cost upward of \$11,000. Despite the steep price, the EastSide Bobcats found they had a very dedicated fan base at Vanderbilt.

"For some boys, this is their most enjoyable activity of the whole fall," said John "Dick" Dixon, M.D., associate professor of Medicine.

Dixon's son, J.D., is a coach for the Bobcats and Dixon (who played football in college) sometimes comes out to do a little coaching too. A photograph from the 12-year-old Bobcats' team championship win in 2007 hangs on the wall of his office in the Vanderbilt Heart and Vascular Institute. Dixon, who can rattle off the names of Bobcat players he has known, says it's hard to list the benefits of sports for young people—the list is so long.

"They go on to play varsity football in high school and some may have an opportunity to go on and play in college. But there's practically no chance of a path like that if they don't start young, in these youth leagues," Dixon said.

Coach Ballet, a native New Orleanian,



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Bobcats players are excited by their new uniforms, excited by their new helmets—overall, they're just excited.



Coach David "Smokey" Patterson makes it a point to offer encouragement to his players every day.

said he feared loss of the Bobcats might do this neighborhood what loss of a community amusement park did to the neighborhood of his youth.

"That park kept the kids out of trouble and gave them something to look forward to. When it closed the whole neighborhood dropped and crime rose. I didn't want that to happen to people in East Nashville," Ballet said.

Science bears witness to the good a league like the Bobcats can do: According to the National Academy of Sciences, participation in out-of-school activities like sports helps grades, reduces absenteeism and dropout rates, and even reduces violence between student peers.

Patricia Waggoner is a team mom for the pee wee team. Her daughter is a cheerleader and her 5-year-old son played his first season this year. She and other team supporters worked around

the neighborhood to raise most of the money needed for cheerleader uniforms. Shade Tree kicked in the rest. In August, Waggoner took her children to the practice field to pick up brand new uniforms, handed out by the Vanderbilt students.

"When he got his uniform my son said, 'Look mama, I get to wear this jersey! And the pants, do I get to wear the pants and the socks?' I told him yes he did. The morning of the first game he woke me up way before it was time to go and had gotten himself all ready for that game," Waggoner laughed.

Coach Ballet marvels at what has happened here. Last Spring it looked as if the ballfield lights would go dark and opportunities would be lost. Today, the league is finishing up the season. Both coach Ballet's 12-year-old team and Coach J. D. Dixon's 8-year-old team are headed for post season playoff games.

Issac Litton Middle School has now offered to become the East Nashville Bobcats' home field, while practices will remain in McFerrin Park.

"My thought is—wow! That's the biggest word about Shade Tree. They stepped up when they did and if they hadn't, I don't know if we would have had a football program now," Ballet said. "When I look at that (Shade Tree) trailer, I wonder where our community would be if that clinic wouldn't have been there."

Team info: <http://www.tyfa.org/>

Shade Tree info: <http://www.shadetreeclinic.org/>

Coach Ballet, the Eastside BobCats and their friends at the Shade Tree Clinic will be featured on the VUcast video newscast the week of November 8 at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/news>.

**WHEN HE GOT HIS UNIFORM MY SON SAID,
'LOOK MAMA, I GET TO WEAR THIS JERSEY!'**