

Giving children the chance to be brave

A youth sports organization's fund-raiser aims to support children in hospitals and from military families

By Jessica White

The Trend

A youth football and cheerleading organization in Gloucester County is hoping to help children all over South Jersey with its annual fund-raising event.

Every year, the Monroe Township Braves, headquartered in Williamstown, sponsors a community project, and this year's endeavor hopes to inspire "bravery" among its recipients.

"We wanted to take our name and use to think of who needs to be brave in society," said Jeanne Colombo, director of sponsorship and publicity for the Braves.

Thus, "Brave Bears for Brave Kids" was born. Each player and cheerleader for the Braves will sell four stuffed bears, and at the end of the project in August, all the bears will be donated to various hospitals across South Jersey for distributions to young patients who may be frightened at the thought of a hospital visit or stay.

Bears will also be distributed to children of military families whose parents have been deployed to Iraq through Operation: Military Kids of New Jersey, an organization that supports children throughout the state with parents in the National Guard and the Army Reserve.

"It's a little message to kids to be brave while they're away," said Colombo.

Currently, over 100 children from New Jersey have parents serving in the National Guard and the Army Reserve, and that number is expected to grow by the project's end.

Each stuffed bear wears either a sweat-shirt or army fatigues bearing the message "Be Brave! Someone cares about you from the Monroe Township Braves Youth Football and Cheerleading organization."

During the Monroe Township Braves' initial registration and kickoff for the "Brave Bears for Brave Kids" fund-raiser on March 27, military parent Matthew Buerklin was on hand to show his support for the organization and its goal.

Buerklin, a gunnery sergeant from the U.S. Marines who recently returned from Iraq, has a son, Max, who participates in the Braves sports program.

"It's great when your parent or loved one is away. It lets you know that others are thinking about you, and that makes you feel better," Buerklin said.

"It helps a lot for organizations like this

to support the troops over there — the smallest little thing helps," he added.

Five hospitals will receive bears as part of the project: Underwood Memorial Hospital in Woodbury, Cooper University Hospital in Camden, Virtua Health in Voorhees, Kennedy Health System's branch in Washington Township and South Jersey Healthcare, which has a branch in Elmer.

Representatives from several of these hospitals were on hand during the first registration.

"We're thrilled. We think it's great when the community gets involved with the hospital," said Denise Morin, assistant director of human resources from Underwood. "I think it's going to be well-received."

Several hospital personnel were excited at the prospect of a project with a great deal of involvement from young children.

"It's awesome, especially to get kids involved at such an early age," said Ellen Fernandez, nurse manager of pediatrics at Kennedy.

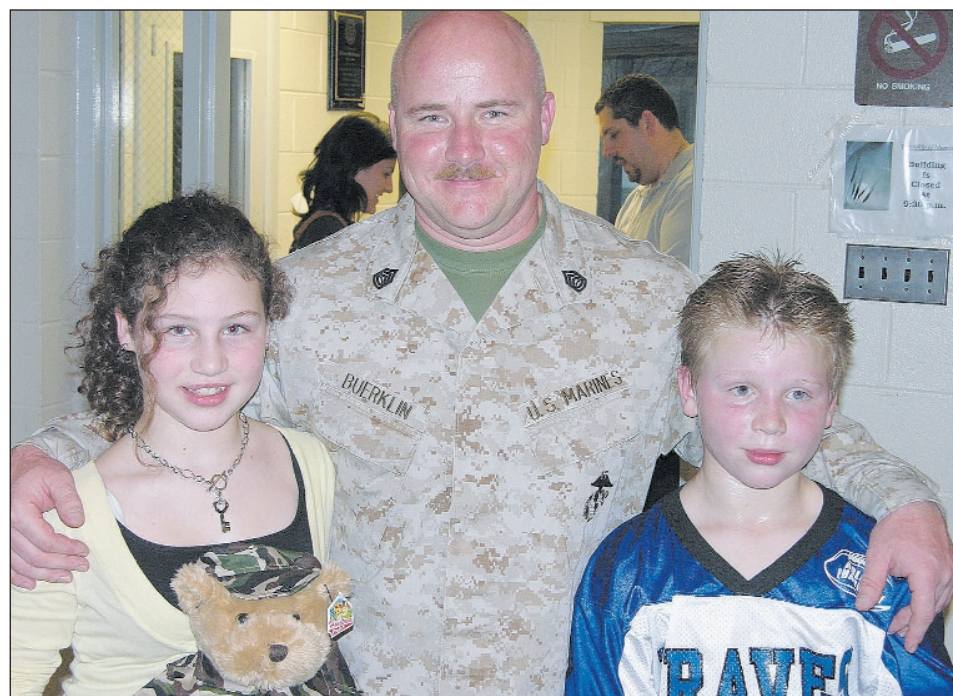
"It's instilling important values in children," added Althea Miley, director of guest services at Kennedy. "Kids in the hospital who receive the bears will feel how good it is to have someone care about them."

"The biggest, coolest thing about this is that it's kids doing it for other kids. That really makes a connection," said Sherry Schlagle, child life specialist for Cooper Hospital.

"It's a win-win [situation]," said Beth Van Buskirk, child life specialist for Virtua Health, of the Braves' project. "It helps support their organization and benefits all children in South Jersey."

Although plans are not yet final as to how the bears will be distributed, hospital representatives offered diverse ideas for their distribution, from handing them out to children in the ER to giving some bears to senior citizens, since many older people that are hospitalized also desire the comfort that a stuffed animal can provide.

While children from the Braves will be selling bears all throughout Gloucester County, those in other areas who want to support the project can do so by purchasing a bear through the organization's Web site at www.mtbravesonline.com. Each bear costs \$25, and the purchase is tax-deductible.



Photos by Jessica White/The Trend

(Top) Gunnery Sergeant Matthew Buerklin from the U.S. Marines poses with his children, Madison (left) and Max (right). Max is involved with the Braves football team. (Bottom) When parents walked into the Pfeiffer Center in Williamstown on March 27 to register their children for the Braves football and cheerleading program, they were greeted by a thorough explanation of the "Brave Bears for Brave Kids" project from representatives at the registration table and a sample of one of the bears that will be distributed to South Jersey children.

