

MY TURN

Buddy Baseball kicks off another season

By PAM ROBERTS

I wasn't sure how it would feel to coach Buddy Baseball last season. Buddy Baseball is the program my son, Thomas Roberts-Wierzbowski, founded in 1994 for young people with disabilities to play ball with the help of a peer buddy. Thomas was 11 years old then and had seen a newsletter photo of a boy in a wheelchair holding a Challenger Baseball trophy.

"I want to do that," he said. My son had just started using a wheelchair because of AT, a congenital, progressive neurological condition.

And so our family, along with his physical therapist, Leslie Anderson, Greenfield's Recreation Director (Mike Kociela at the time), and other supporters came together to create Buddy Baseball. Kids using wheelchairs or walkers or with other challenges came to the field behind the middle school in Greenfield, and we figured out how to participate in the great American pastime of playing ball.

Over the years our little band of devoted families — players, buddies and supporters — grew up. People came and went, but our program and my son and I remained, 23 years and going strong since the initial season.

Then Thomas' health took a turn for the worse, and he passed away at the end of December 2016. As spring approached last year I wondered if I could go back to Buddy Baseball without him? Buddy Baseball is my son's legacy, I thought. Could I stay involved and help keep it going?

That first Saturday I went to the field with trepidation. I was delighted to meet new participants and to see all the returning kids, many of

whom, as usual, seemed to have grown a foot taller and gained maturity over the winter. It was a little like a family reunion, greeting each other again. To my surprise, a long-time player, a hearty Red Sox fan who had moved farther away, had returned with a new personal care attendant pushing his wheelchair. This player doesn't speak but has a smile that lights up the field, and it filled my heart to see it again.



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Another of the older players said, "I miss Thomas. But I think he is here in

spirit."

"I do too," I replied, "I feel him too."

What really did it for me, then, what made me certain that I was right to come back, was watching a father-son team play. We had warmed up together, me throwing a koosh ball to the boy, his dad helping his son move his arm so he could throw it back. And then we were playing a game, and the dad was pushing the son in his wheelchair to home base, where I stood. The teen looked electrified. His whole body and face were aglow, his smile huge as they ran past the base. Safe at home!

I gave the teen a high five as they slowed down. "You ran like the wind!" I said, and player and dad and I all shimmered with joy in the morning sun.

I remember this moment now and many more like it as we prepare for our upcoming 25th season. It will be good to be back, even though it's been another tough year. We lost a treasured player, Danny, this past winter. And two people, who have been long time sponsors, Charlie Cohn of Cohn Financial Services, and Ed Margola, CPA, also recently passed away.

But if anything, Buddy

Baseball is heartwarming and fun. Our goals are to learn baseball skills, stay safe, and enjoy. We foster a non-competitive atmosphere. Players bat from a pitch or a tee until they get a hit. Runners keep on going after being tagged out. Many players bring family members or friends as their buddies. We love our buddies who help keep players safe while providing momentum for a wheelchair or support in the field.

Our season started May 12 at the Greenfield Middle School field, and runs through June 23 when we have our final game, awards ceremony and pizza party at the Green River Swimming and Recreation Area. We will also have an away game with the Challenger Baseball team at Belchertown's mini Fenway.

We are hoping to find some more members of our Buddy Baseball family. We are looking for more players, buddies, coaches and sponsors to join our team. There is a charge for players, (funding assistance is available) and buddies play for free.

As we do every year, at the end of last year's season we voted on our logo and T-shirt color for the following year. Last year the vote was for the Wild Jackals — in red print on a bright orange tee. Want to come be a Wild Jackal with us?

Buddy Baseball is a program of the Greenfield Recreation Department for kids 6-18. For more info or to register contact maddyb@Greenfield-ma.gov or call 413-772-1553.

Pam Roberts is a writer, artist and yoga teacher who leads workshops and classes for people with cancer and others. In addition to her son Thomas Roberts-Wierzbowski, the founder of Buddy Baseball, she has a daughter, Victoria Roberts-Wierzbowski, who was one of the first and long-time buddies for the program, starting at age 6.