

Seventh-grader makes an altruistic assist

HMS' Conor Donlevy uses grant to bring basketball to his classmates with special needs

By Ken Knutson

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Hinsdale Middle School seventh-grader Conor Donlevy loves team sports and the camaraderie they engender.

He also loves being an instrument to extend opportunities for all to participate, regardless of abilities.

So when Donlevy recognized that students with special needs in Community Consolidated Elementary District 181 would enjoy more access to athletics, he got a game plan together.

"I knew that HMS had a basketball team. I knew it was a big event and almost the entire school turned out for the basketball games," Donlevy said. "I figured that maybe the autistic kids would like to have something like that, where someone was cheering for them and they were getting to be athletic and make new friends."

So he applied for one of the new District 181 Foundation's "Kids Initiating a Difference in Society" (K.I.D.S.) grants, proposing to create a basketball team specifically for district students with special needs.

"I really do like serving others," Donlevy said. "I just figured this was a way I could help people."

Donlevy sought the help of adaptive physical education instructor Gus Lauermann to navigate the medical release forms and other paperwork.

Lauermann said he was both excited about the idea and captivated by Donlevy's maturity beyond his years.

"You would not believe he's a middle school student," he said. "He was in on almost every single aspect of the whole process."

By this time it was November, and the hope was to conduct the program during the regular school basketball season starting in



Conor Donlevy (back row, far left) talks after a game with a member of the District 181 special needs basketball team, which was coached by adaptive physical education teacher Gus Lauermann (front row, far right). Donlevy was impressed with the common skill level shared by the players despite a wide age range. "The second-graders were just as good as the eighth-graders," he said. (photo courtesy of Trish Donlevy)

December.

That meant 7 a.m. meetings twice a week and getting in touch with parents of prospective players to gauge their interest level. They hoped to attract at least five participants.

"In a matter of two days, we had 11 parents indicating they wanted to be part of this," Lauermann said. "It came together in all of about two weeks."

A total of 14 students from four different schools, spanning second to eighth grades, eventually signed on, and Oak School's gymnasium was opened to them for one-hour practices after school.

"Almost all the parents really liked that people were reaching out and helping their kids so that they could have more athleticism in their lives and more of a team mentality," Donlevy said.

Most of the \$150 grant went to purchase team uniforms — designed by Donlevy — each personalized with the player's name on the back.

Players were drilled in the fundamentals, and Donlevy and Lauermann got some additional coaching help.

Janet Meyer's eighth-grade daughter Maria played on

the team, and her son Josh, a junior at Hinsdale Central High School, was one of several volunteers at practices.

Meyer said seeing her son develop his nurturing side was just as special as watching her daughter play.

"I think it taught (the boys) that they have to be patient and how to rethink how they're going to teach them. You have to adapt your ways," she said.

Through Special Olympics Illinois, the team was able to set up three weekend games with area teams and register for the season-ending tournament in Cicero.

"It was great seeing the progress they made and how much fun they had playing basketball," Donlevy said. "They didn't care about the score."

He noted their buoyant spirits even after losing their first tournament game in front of a large crowd.

"The kids were ecstatic. They loved everything, they were just running around, happy," he said.

Lauermann, who was presented with a poster-size photo montage from the season for his office, said the community support was critical the program's success.

"This could not have happened without the volun-

teers and the parents' support and the district administration," he said.

Meyer said observing the joy on each of the kids' faces during games, in spite of their disabilities, was a victory in itself.

"I think being on a team, having people cheering for them, for them it was great because they don't get that all the time," Meyer said.

"Even though we did not win, we were laughing and in tears at the games. The whole thing was so moving,"

With only two of this season's players graduating to high school, expectations are high for a bigger roster and a more robust schedule next year.

Donlevy also plans to encourage more of his friends to fill the stands at games and root for their classmates.

"Next year, if we could incorporate the students more, I think the kids would love that," he said.

Ultimately, he hopes to inspire his peers to find ways to serve the community, a mission he will undoubtedly carry into high school and beyond.

"I was taught to give what I can and help others in any way possible," he said. "It's the right thing to do."



Conor Donlevy plays sports in all seasons, including baseball and hockey in the spring. This past winter, the Hinsdale Middle School seventh-grader drew on that love to spearhead the creation of a basketball team for students with special needs in Community Consolidated Elementary District 181. (Jim Slonoff photo)