

Youth Teams Supported by Senior Fans in Guilford

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There's plenty of room on the bleachers for more senior citizens to join a growing crowd of Senior Boosters at Guilford youth sports programs.

Senior Boosters matches senior citizens to youth sports teams, creating a much appreciated, built-in fan base. The idea is the creation of Guilford Friendly Visiting volunteer Tod Hart. Active in Guilford recreation league basketball for nine years, Hart still officiates but took on a role as a volunteer with Friendly Visiting as a new community service project in 2009.

Before this year's 2009-2010 recreational basketball season got underway, Hart brought his idea to the league's coaches and also to local seniors. As a result, a very willing 7th grade girls' team was adopted by a small group of adoring older female fans and Senior Boosters was born. Come baseball season, the fan group had grown to about eight dedicated senior supporters, adopted by a boys' Little League team.

Now, Hart's hoping for plenty more to join in the fun this fall.

"It's started to grow. It's got some roots and some interest among the seniors we've contacted already and now we're really trying to reach out to let not only the seniors know, but also people who may have loved ones that are local and they're looking for something to get them involved in," said Hart.

Hart said the support he's received from youth leagues to which he's pitched the idea has been "awesome."

"When I pitched it to the Little League and I pitched it to basketball, there was an interest to be a part, and make this work, by the coaches involved," said Hart.

He noted the teams have supplied their Senior Boosters with T-shirts and even caps in team colors to wear to every game.

"They become a part of the team," he said.

Friendly Visiting is a program of non-profit Guilford Interfaith Ministries and program director Lori Wells said she's seen for herself how much young players enjoy having their own set of Senior Boosters. Wells attended games where the seniors cheered for the Little League Majors team known as the Orioles.

"I spoke with a group of moms at one of the games and they remarked how the boys really appreciate their fan base...they sneak out of the dugout to check the bleachers for 'their' group of senior fans," said Wells.

The Orioles, managed by John Peters, included players Isaac Abrams, Evan Hilgert, Julian Horvath, Nicholas Mascola, Tyler McLain, Sean Morrissey, Matthew Murchison, Jack Oman, Connor Peters, Matthew Piersanti, Tyler Pierson, Ricky Sandella, and Wills Smith.

Win, lose, or draw, the spirit of the Orioles' Senior Boosters blossomed during the weeks of play, said Wells.

"Their enthusiasm only grew stronger as the season progressed," she said.

Hart is planning to speak soon with some of the town's recreational fall sports programs about helping roll the Senior Boosters program into following a fall sports team or two. Right now, he's concentrating on drumming up more seniors to get involved, get out of the house, and get cheering.

Once you get them out to their first game and they start getting to know folks and the team, it's easy. We just want to get them out there and get involved and then they become a part of the whole youth sports thing. Really, it's just an introduction and people caring about other people," said Hart.

If you or someone you know would like to join Friendly Visiting's Senior Boosters program, call 203-453-8359.