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The Bartlett Examiner-Wednesday, June 2, 2010-Page 20

Challengers Program offers unique opportunity



Allie Reninger, 16, runs to first base after getting a base hit for the Cubs team, on Sunday, May 23 at Ruzicka Park in Bartlett.

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Story and photo by Allison Prang

Allie Reninger jogged to first base with a smile spread across her face after she had a base hit for the Cubs, one of the six teams that were a part of the Challengers Program.

"She loves it," Lisa Reninger, Allie's mother said, of her 16 year-old daughter. "She's been doing it for years."

Allie Reninger is one of over 50 kids involved in the Challengers Program, a community effort that coordinates six teams and 13 baseball games for kids with special needs and disabilities. The kids are paired up with youth baseball players from local Bartlett teams who help the kids learn how to put together and play an organized baseball game.

The program is funded and supported by the Bartlett Little League and their sector of the Challengers Program is the largest in the country, according to Anne Andreuccetti, coordinator of the Challenger's Program in Bartlett. Andreuccetti said the program has grown so much in popularity in the area that children come from as far as Rockford to participate.

Andreuccetti said she has headed the program in Bartlett for 12 years and was inspired when her son was one of the youth volunteers to help provide the game of baseball to the children with needs.

"They're kids too that want to play sports," Andreuccetti said. "This is the only opportunity these parents might have in the week to be on the sidelines."

She said the games revolve around the buddy system, where at each position in the field there is not only one of the players, but one of the youth volunteers that teaches the player what to do in that specific position. The children are drafted so that each team is relatively equal in skill level.

"He loved baseball and wanted to be a part of it," said Mike Miles, the coach of the Cubs team in the program and father to Derek Miles, 16, who has Down syndrome. "He loves it."

The coach of the White Sox Challengers team, Ralph Green volunteered to coach on behalf of his daughter, Virginia Green, 15.

"She especially loves the night games," Green said.

Aside from baseball games, the children participating in the Challengers Program receive trophies, uniforms, an ice cream social after the game, hot dogs, an end-of-the-year party and as a group, they attend a Schaumburg Flyers game.

"I think it's a good way to have these kids play," 13 year-old Eric Bergquist, one of the youth volunteers said after taking a break from helping in the field. "It's a great organization."

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