

MAY 14, 2016 3:49 PM

Dad honors son's memory with baseball field for Mission Arlington

Hunter Irwin died in 2014 at age 23

His father, Mike Irwin, struggled with how to honor his life

Hunter's Field started as simple idea but became labor of love for many





Children pass the monument to Hunter Irwin. **Jason K Waite** Jason Waite Photography

BY FAYE REEDER freeder@star-telegram.com

Soon after his son's death, Mike Irwin knew he wanted to do something important in his memory. Hunter Irwin died in 2014 at age 23, and his dad spent the next two years grieving and contemplating what would best honor Hunter's life.

On a recent Saturday morning, Mike and his wife, Sandra, stood alongside a memorial plaque mounted on a handsome white pedestal, part of a large crowd gathered to dedicate Hunter's Field, a baseball field recently constructed behind Parkview Church on Fielder Road.

"When I was trying to think of something to do in Hunter's honor that would impact other lives, the idea of a baseball field just kept coming back to me over and over," Mike said. "I eventually quit trying to figure out why and just rolled with it."

In September, the field was little more than an uneven and rutted sticker patch when two Mission Arlington volunteers began using it for a youth baseball academy to serve kids age 5 to 13 who lived in apartments served by the agency's apartment ministry.

Volunteers Jerry McCullough and Jim Reeder met with Mission Arlington leader Tillie Burgin in the spring of last year to discuss starting the baseball program, but the problem of finding a suitable location for a field stalled the project until Burgin asked them to take a look at the land behind Parkview Church.

"It certainly wasn't the ideal spot for playing baseball, but we made the best of it last fall and we had more than 100 kids participate in the first academy," said Reeder.

Dedicated volunteers showed up every Saturday for several weeks to teach the children the basics of baseball, followed by a game and some time for a short devotional period.

As plans geared up for a second season, Irwin heard about it. He offered the services of his fencing company, The Anchor Group, to level off the field and build a fence and dugouts.

When Irwin contacted construction firm Buford-Thompson about the project, company President Sammy Martin responded with far more than was expected and ultimately provided the engineering, surrounding ground preparation and much more.

Irwin said that he did not seek outside help for the project but that as other companies came forward, "I just had to get out of the way because I began to see that God was going to be the general contractor on this, not me." The result was a first-class facility for youth baseball.

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Mike Irwin, Hunter's father

Donors wanting to add features to the field seemed to materialize magically. Now the field is fully sodded with clay base paths and pitcher's mound, and even an irrigation system. Recent spring rains quickly established the grass into a lush carpet. The Arlington Parks and Recreation Department put the final touch on the field the day before the dedication by chalking the foul lines.

Irwin said the project far exceeded his original expectations. “I envisioned building a little ballfield and keeping it way under the radar, and it started mushrooming until it was totally out of my control.”

The real winners were the young baseball players sitting cross-legged alongside the fence under a beautiful sunny sky as they listened to remarks by Irwin, Burgin and others at the dedication ceremonies. Many of them looked as if they were growing into their gangly arms and legs, full of promise and energy.

Before the dedication and baseball game, the youngsters lined up in groups to receive a backpack emblazoned with the baseball academy logo and filled with an imprinted T-shirt and ball cap — all donated by Raymond Hokanson of E6 Sportswear. A big surprise gift for the kids was a Mizuno baseball glove for each participant funded by private donors.

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Mission Arlington leader Tillie Burgin

“All the niceties the kids got are great,” said Burgin, “but the most important thing about this is the love they can feel from these volunteers. Most of these kids won’t ever see a Rangers game or might not have a chance to even play ball if it weren’t for this opportunity. It is God’s work making this happen.” Burgin energetically threw out the ceremonial first pitch to the delight of the crowd before the games commenced.

After the fanfare of the ceremonies and once the games were underway, Irwin quietly shared his feelings on the day and what it meant to him.

“Most every day I drive up and down Fielder Road for work and I see the apartment where I found Hunter when he passed way,” he said wiping away tears. “I struggled with seeing it every single day, and I knew I needed to do something positive to help my healing process.”

“The fact that I can now drive down Fielder Road each day and look over at this field is making things better. It has blessed my family, and it has changed lives in my family just being part of this process.” Irwin said the project has inspired him to do other things in the community going forward.

Mission Arlington board Chairman Denny Dowd, along with Jim Burgin, pastor of Grace Street Church, spoke at the ceremonies and likened the project to some of the remarkable outcomes played out in the film *Field of Dreams*. A host of others donating to the project, including A&B Foundry, which donated the monument, were also applauded by an appreciative crowd.

When asked about the impact of the academy and the construction of the field, McCullough said, “This project has touched my heart in that we were able to teach baseball skills to young people who maybe wouldn’t get this opportunity. We’re hoping to instill the love of the game of baseball in them and they can share it with others.”

At day’s end, each youngster received a baseball to take home as they in single file passed by Hunter Irwin’s memorial structure, touching it lightly and each murmuring “Thank you, Hunter. Thank you, God,” as they left the field.