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## • A League of its Own

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The Mission Arlington Baseball Academy leadership team: Jim Reeder, Tillie Burgin and Jerry McCullough. (Photo: Toni Randle-Cook)

The Mission Arlington Baseball Academy is in full swing. The program, which is geared toward elementary school aged children, was the vision of Jerry McCullough and Jim Reeder.

The men, both Bible study leaders with Mission Arlington, a faith-based organization created to assist people with their physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual needs, were coaching basketball together last year when they tossed around the idea of adding another sports program - baseball.

The two felt it was important, considering the area.

"We've got the major league team here," says McCullough, "and I knew we didn't have a baseball program at Mission Arlington."

McCullough played baseball throughout his childhood. He and his entire family are fans of the game, even joining the Rangers each year at spring training in Surprise, Ariz.

Back in the day, Reeder's father owned the only sports equipment store in Arlington. He was surrounded by a love of sports and went on to play baseball in high school and college.

"When I grew up here we didn't have a pro baseball team," Reeder says. "You know now we have the Rangers, and the kids can be exposed to it."

The two men took their idea of a new baseball program to Mission Arlington Executive Director Tillie Burgin.

"Taking church to the people" is Mission Arlington's motto, and McCullough says Burgin was very supportive. "She knew through baseball that we could reach a lot of kids," he says.

Even though she wasn't sure how it was going to come together, Burgin gave the idea the green light.

McCullough and Reeder started to look for a spot to run the academy. Burgin suggested an open space behind Parkview Church off of Fielder Road. While it was big enough, it was not in the best condition. There was a sand volleyball court in the middle, which had not been used in some time, and the land was covered with stickers.

Yet they went ahead and used it for the first sessions, which took place this past fall.

"These kids, for the most part, 95 percent of them had never put on a baseball glove or knew much about the game at all," Reeder says. No matter. About one hundred youth, recruited from Mission Arlington's apartment ministry churches, attended each session.

In December, McCullough mentioned to Burgin that the field needed some work done to overcome safety and usability issues. She told him about Mike Irwin, a Mission Arlington board member and volunteer.

"He stepped up and volunteered when he heard about it," McCullough says.

Irwin made an offer. He had been looking for a way to honor his 23-year-old son Hunter, who died in 2014. "It was something on his heart that he wanted to do for children - dedicated to his son, dedicated to the Lord most of all - and that's to teach the children how to play, to have the skills," Burgin says.

Irwin, who owns a fencing company, leveled off the field, built a fence and dugouts. Other local companies then offered their services to help finish what is now known as "Hunter's Field."

Academy participants took to the new field in May. Most of these children will not have the opportunity to play in another league. And being a part of this program makes a huge impact on their lives - on and off the field.

"We would do it every Saturday if we could, because of the environment of it, the excitement," says Burgin, "It's what you want for every kid that doesn't have that in their home setting. You can see them learning and working together. The setting of it will keep them off the street."

So what does a typical session at Arlington Academy look like?

The boys and girls are broken into groups. Some of those groups are on the field running a simulated game. The others rotate through drill stations outside the field, learning how to hit off the batting tee, field ground balls, field fly balls and practice base running and throwing.

And while the kids are learning baseball skills, McCullough explains they are also taking away something much more important. "We wanted to share God's work with them while we we're doing it," he says. "That's our whole purpose at Mission Arlington: to share the gospel."

In the middle of each session, time is set aside for a devotional. "We try to tie it around baseball so that it sticks with them," says Reeder. "But that's an important part of what we do in every academy."

It may only be for 10 minutes, but the message is there.

"It's about more than baseball," Reeder says. "It's making a real meaningful impact on these kids' lives when they accept Jesus Christ - that's what it comes down to."

The men make no secret of their faith. In fact, everyone involved in this project puts God at the center of it all.

"It's a God thing," says McCullough. "It wasn't something that Jim and I did. It was something that God did."

Reeder echoes that sentiment: "We've gotten a whole lot of good feeling about it. It really just makes us feel like it's God plan for this thing to happen. It just came together."

McCullough and Reeder are grateful for the volunteers who help them with the academy sessions, but say they could use more people who want to come out to share their abilities and love of baseball and for kids. "The more people we have, the smaller the groups become, and you can give more individual attention," says Reeder.

McCullough and Reeder say they will lead a one-day session in July and in August, then a longer session in the fall. Both would like to see the sessions continue in the future and the size of the academy grow, eventually to become a league of its own.