

# The ADVOCATE

## Wilson aims to empower kids with lacrosse

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WESTPORT -- Bridgeport's Don Wilson was up with the sun. Actually, Wilson was up before the sun, taking care of some business before tossing his daughter, Nijah, and his son, Josiah, into the car and heading down I-95 to continue his mission of spreading the word about lacrosse.

And it's a huge mission. Until about two years ago, lacrosse and Bridgeport were like oil and vinegar. They didn't mix. None of the city's high schools offered the sport and no other facility -- the Cardinal Shehan Center, the Burroughs Community Center, the Ralphola Taylor Center -- offered it either.

What to do? What to do?

Josiah was playing in Greenwich at the Brunswick School and Nijah was playing in New Canaan at St. Juke's. Rather than fight the expressway traffic on Saturday mornings -- Wilson already played that game Monday through Friday going to his job at Greenwich Recycling -- he thought there had to be a better way.

So he started making phone calls. Phone calls led to meetings. Meetings led to action. Action led to creation of Bridgeport Youth Lacrosse. Since its very humble beginnings in 2007 at the Shehan Center, Wilson's program has now expanded to Trumbull Gardens, where a total of 120 kids (80 solid ones who show up every week) are now participating.

And that's just the beginning.

"This started as a dream. I wanted to expose my son

to lacrosse, but I had to travel to Greenwich for his lessons," Wilson told the members of the Westport Sunrise Rotary Club Friday morning at Bobby Q's Restaurant. "(Creating a program in Bridgeport) started as a dream and now it consumes my life. I eat, sleep and dream lacrosse and the more people I can expose to the sport, the better."

Wilson's actions have gotten him some exposure. This past week, he was named as the Bridgeport "Sports Person of the Year" by the Fairfield County Sports Commission. Wilson and 14 other sports persons from the region will be honored, along with the 2009 class of inductees into the commission's Hall of Fame -- Charles Smith, Jen Rizzotti, Dick Siderowf, Pete Demmerele, Joe Benanto and Terry Lowe -- on Oct. 19 at the Hyatt Regency in Greenwich.

"It's awesome, but I didn't start this (program) to receive accolades," Wilson said. "Going out and seeing the effect on the community, seeing how the other communities are responding, helping us, that's a huge thing, because we can't do this in Bridgeport by ourselves. We need the support from everyone."

And so far, Wilson is getting it. Jen Fallon, the head coach of the women's lacrosse program at the University of New Haven, and Fairfield University men's coach Andy Copeland have both shared their services to help teach the sport. And Joe Lizzio, who played lacrosse at Cornell and created the "Rusty Red Foundation," which helps fund youth sports programs across the country, has also donated to the program.

But that's not enough.

Because, according to Wilson, many of these kids don't just need things like equipment, they need encouragement.

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They need a mentor to guide them.

"That's a big component of what I'm trying to do, get mentors for the kids," Wilson said. "Because I realize how important it is to have mentors. I have mentors now and it's helped me tremendously in my life, it helps me with every decision. That's a good thing. That's something I didn't have when I was growing up."

And while Greenwich High School had lacrosse in the late 1980s when Wilson went there (he played football and ran track), only Central of the four Bridgeport high schools is offering varsity lacrosse. By the continued growth of Bridgeport Youth Lacrosse, hopefully one day soon, Harding, Bassick and Bullard-Havens will also offer lacrosse as a club or possibly a varsity sport.

"I'm trying to work with the schools. I've been trying to get high school kids to empower themselves by starting club teams," Wilson said. "And I'm sure once they start club teams at Bassick and Harding, the schools might pick it up. I know that it's an expensive sport and I have to be realistic. So what I've told the kids, that we would try to get the equipment for them through these other communities, and I'm hoping they take me up on that."

"I want to work with the AD (athletic directors) at Harding and Bassick (and Bullard-Havens) to start teams. It would give these kids another opportunity to get a scholarship and get to college, especially inner-city kids."

One local school that recently did start a lacrosse program is the University of Bridgeport, where a women's team, under new coach Tricia Zubrowski, will begin play in the East Coast Conference in the spring of 2010.

"Making a difference has empowered me," Wilson said. "I see myself doing a lot of different thing with lacrosse. I don't know where it's going to take me, but I'm excited. I want to let people know that it's out there. That's my mission."

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