

'PLAYING IT FORWARD'



More than 1,500 Lafayette area school children attended the Purdue-Oakland game on December 20, 2011.



Tom Reiter and Katy Bunder hold up a sign celebrating the fact that Boiler Crunch collected 1,348 boxes of cereal for the Food Finders Food Bank backpack program.

Aside from academics and their rigorous practice and game schedules, there is something else that is a mainstay during the year for the Purdue women's basketball team: volunteerism and community service. And for the team, the idea is much more than giving back, although that is a big part of what they do.

KK Houser, a sophomore from Lincoln, Neb., emphasizes that community service is not something the team has to do, but is a true volunteer effort.

"And because we reach out and help other people, they come to the games, and they reach out and support us," she says. So the team's participation in community service does affect their game of basketball in that they get more support from the community and maybe even more fans.

But head coach Sharon Versyp wants the student athletes to remember that life has many other lessons in addition to basketball. All of the experiences gained in volunteering help reinforce this message so that the concept is taught in college, and one that remains with them forever.

AND BACK

STORY BY JENNIFER STREISAND
PHOTOS BY JOHN TERHUNE



“Service is very important because you see the impact that you make on other people,” Versyp says. She calls it “the service of fighting for life.” The list of service-related activities for the women’s team is long: participation in the Lafayette area Hunger Hike, various walks for cancer, visits to the veterans homes, a summer trip to Haiti, gifts for a family at Christmas, reaching out to families struggling with illness, reading to kids, and raising awareness for breast cancer with promotions during a basketball game. Known as the Pink Zone game, it is scheduled this year for Feb. 26, against Indiana. The team also kicked off a walk at Subaru of Indiana Automotive, Inc. (SIA) last fall to raise funds to end breast cancer.

This year, as they do every year before their season begins, the women’s team participates in one large community service event. On a perfect fall day in September, the team took part in the Hunger Hike. The annual event raises funds for the food programs at Lafayette Urban Ministry (LUM), Food Finders Food Bank and the St. Thomas Aquinas Haiti Ministry, says Patti O’Callaghan, chair of the Hunger Hike and director of social justice at Lafayette Urban Ministry.

The basketball team not only participates in these events but is appreciative of the opportunity to do so.

“Even though we went to Haiti, there are a lot of people in the United States who can’t afford to eat, so just by going out there and walking and raising money for them is another way of ‘paying it forward,’” says Drey Mingo, a senior from Atlanta. Mingo understands the importance of community support. She has had her own obstacles to overcome, including recovering from bacterial meningitis during 2010-11, and sustaining a knee injury in October 2011. Although she is not expected to play in the 2011-12 season, she continues to be part of the team, helping to support the women and traveling with them, says Sara White, an associate athletics communications director, Purdue Women’s Basketball and Women’s Golf.

Of their summer trip to Haiti, Mingo calls it a “humbling experience,” because of the struggles that so many face in Haiti. “And yet they are the happiest and most compassionate people you could ever be around.”

During the Hunger Hike, the team made its entrance to Riehle Plaza on the Boilermaker Special. This was a good way for them to connect with the community and ➤



Members of the Purdue women's basketball team pose for a picture at the Making Strides Against Breast Cancer Walk last year. (photo provided)



“give back because we are the blessed ones,” said Versyp to the large crowd gathered at the plaza gearing up for the hike. Versyp was the honorary chair of the 2011 Hunger Hike.

The team signed some autographs and gathered for pictures.

“The event gives us a chance to mingle with fans in addition to being a service opportunity,” says Brittany Rayburn, a senior from Attica, Ind. “It’s a nice time to talk with people and a good cause.”

In our culture, athletes are role models, beginning in high school, and the women on the Purdue team take this idea very seriously, on and off of the court.

“There are these little kids out there who are always watching us, and they see what we are doing, and so hopefully, the younger generation will partake in community service activities the way we have,” says Courtney Moses, a sophomore on the team, from Sweester, Ind.

Also participating in the Hunger Hike were the Purdue crew and the Harrison High School women’s soccer teams.

Everyone’s efforts yielded more than \$90,000 for the food organizations to feed hungry people in our community, reports O’Callaghan.

Recognizing that the need for food is growing, a new initiative this year for the Purdue women’s team is a cereal drive, dubbed “Boiler Crunch,” to benefit the Food Finders backpack program, White reports. The backpack program is an ongoing service coordinated by Food Finders to send kids home with enough food to eat so they do not feel hungry.

Fans were asked to drop off cereal at the Texas A&M game on Dec. 4, the Notre Dame game on Dec. 10, and at retail locations in Greater Lafayette. On December 20, a presentation was planned to Food Finders at the home game against Oakland, with 1,500 school children in attendance.

“Coach Terry Kix approached me at the Hunger Hike,” recalls Katy Bunder, executive director of Food Finders Food Bank, “and said that the young women on the team were really interested in helping feed the hungry, and then I thought of doing a cereal drive because that is the item that is so needed in our backpacks. It drives the cost of the entire backpack up a lot because cereal can be so expensive.” Kix is director of basketball operations, and works on community outreach programs with the team.

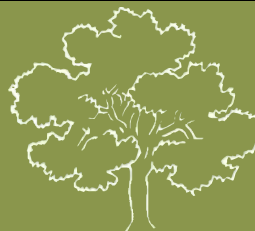
O’Callaghan of Lafayette Urban Ministry threw her support behind the cereal drive.

“I think a cereal drive is a great idea,” she says. “The Food Finders Food Bank backpack program is an outstanding program that fills a real need for children who get lunch at school, but then can be hungry on the weekends.”


The team’s participation in community service activities seems even more praiseworthy given everything else they have to do during the semester, including the long and physically demanding hours they spend practicing—six days a week, for four to six hours a day.

But the student athletes say that community service is important because they can give back, and they feel they have much to be grateful for, including a full scholarship this year, in addition to their natural gifts as athletes.

“To be part of something bigger than ourselves is great for our team,” says Mingo. ❖



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