

BTN LIVEBIG: MINNESOTA, HOPEKIDS PROVIDING SMILES



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It is the nature of volunteerism that you find yourself working with people for whom life is unfairly difficult. Such is the case for the student-athletes from the University of Minnesota who have formed a bond with HopeKids to give moments of pleasure to families of children with terminal illnesses.

On Sept. 7, [HopeKids Minnesota \(http://www.hopekids.org/\)](http://www.hopekids.org/) will host its seventh annual HopeDays Festival on Bierman Athletic Field with the assistance of student-athletes from the University of Minnesota. HopeKids is a national organization that provides events and activities to enhance the lives of families who have a child with a life-threatening illness.

[\(http://www.hopekids.org/\)](http://www.hopekids.org/)The state of Minnesota is one of the top states in the U.S. in terms of resident volunteerism, and the alignment of HopeKids and the University of Minnesota Athletics Department is the perfect match that continues to grow from its inception in 2008.

According to HopeKids President Josh Taylor, HopeKids decided to open a chapter in Minnesota, and made contact with the University of Minnesota initially to see if an arrangement could be made that would provide sporting event tickets for the kids and their families. The arrangement, kick-started by Minnesota Assistant Athletic Director for Student-Athlete Development Peyton Owens III and Assistant Director of Student-Athlete Development Anissa Lightner, turned out to be much more than just a path to get game tickets.



“We let them know what we are doing and asked if there is a way we can be working together,” Taylor said. “They wanted to have a program that could encourage volunteerism. We wanted to do a festival for the kids and their families, and they proposed the idea of hosting the festival and having the student-athletes involved.”

“We did a trial run in 2008 and it was a huge success,” Taylor said. “We have done it every year since, and it has become a part of the culture for the student-athlete.”

“Our partnership with HopeKids has been tremendously beautiful, as we do our very best to bring joy to the lives of those with cancer and other terminal illnesses,” Owens said.

How beautiful has the partnership been?

“This is our seventh year, and we have cycled through four-year students,” Taylor said. “But we now have alums coming back. It meant so much to them while they were at school, it was so important for them, that they are coming back to serve as volunteers, and we are welcoming them.”

“Last year, I think we had over 15 alumni who came back to volunteer,” Lightner said. “A couple had graduated in 2008. That is when you know deep down the impact was permanent.”

The university asks their student-athletes to volunteer at least one hour to the HopeDays festival, although they are not required to do so. Athletes in season are not asked to participate.

The festival includes pony rides, a dog show, performances by the volunteers, and bounce houses supervised by the athletes.

Families from Iowa, South and North Dakota, and Wisconsin attend the HopeDays Festival, which has a variety of activities for the kids and a unique opportunity for the parents, provided as a result of the volunteerism of the Minnesota student-athletes. Taylor said he was aware of one family that schedules annual checkups for their children with doctors in the UM area to coincide with the dates of the Festival.

“The kids and the parents love having the student-athletes at the event,” Taylor said. “They are looked up to in the community, and the kids think it is cool that they would come to our event and hang with them and fun. They play with the kids while the parents can sit back and relax and talk to the other parents.”

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The benefit for the HopeKids is obvious: it is a special day held to celebrate life among children who have a tenuous relationship with life. But it benefits the UM student-athletes as well.

“The hope is that it has an impact on the students in their development, giving them an appreciation that they have it pretty good, and that there are kids who have it a whole lot tougher than them,” Taylor said. “Hopefully it is an eye-opener for them.”

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