

Father's Day

A FATHER AND A FRIEND

Dads get involved with their own children and influence others

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BY RYAN E. SMITH
BLADE STAFF WRITER

L.J. Archambeau has the smile of a proud father on his face. And not just because his 8-year-old son, Tyler, has scored another run in a Little League game.

He bumps fists with his son, then surveys the field from his coaching position next to first base. Really, these are all Mr. Archambeau's kids.

"When I'm out there, I try to be a father to each and every kid out there," he said. "I treat each kid the way I would treat Tyler. I think that's important. I develop a fondness for each one of those kids."

Mr. Archambeau, 34, has four kids of his own, but he's become a father figure to many more by volunteering to help coach his son's Little League team in Maumee for three years now. It's a role that changes everything — a unique chance to become closer to his own son while giving him a role and responsibility in the lives of so many others.



L.J. Archambeau coaches his son, Tyler, during a Little League game in Maumee. Coaching the team gives him time with his son and a chance to help others, too. (THE BLADE/ANDY MORRISON)

This kind of commitment is important on several levels, according to Ron Nichols, director of training at the nonprofit National Center for Fathering in Kansas.

"You're spending time on their turf," he said. "Your presence at those things speaks volumes to the child."

It gives a parent a chance to meet a child's friends, model leadership and service, and simply be with the child.

"If there's something that I can do to spend time directly with my kids, then I'm going to do my best to do it," Mr. Nichols said.

As a former college and independent league baseball player who had been involved in coaching high school and college teams, Mr. Archambeau found helping out on his son's Little League team a natural fit. It was about more than just spending time with his son, though; it was about sharing some of life's great joys and lessons with him.

"You can learn so many different things from playing a team sport and having a coach that can facilitate that is one of the great blessings I've had in my life," he said.

There's also the thrill of being a part of a son's passion as it develops, which Mr. Archambeau noticed one day after a long game and practice.

"After hours of playing and practice, he still wanted to go play catch ... with his dad," he said.

Mike Kleman knows all about the benefits of these kinds of interactions. The 41-year-old is the Cubmaster for his 10-year-old son Tim's Cub Scouts pack in Bowling Green.

He has official duties like writing Pack 485's newsletter and filling out paperwork, but there are others that come with the job. Like bringing the chopped-up hot dogs to use as bait on a fishing trip last month or helping some of the inexperienced ones cast their lines.

Cub Scouts can do a lot for a kid, but Mr. Kleman believes just as strongly in the power for it to enhance a father's relationship with his son.

“It also gives a chance for the parents to work with their sons, to be involved, something that’s not just schoolwork or sports,” he said.



Cubmaster Mike Kleman helps Michael Calcamuggio, 10, during a Boy Scouts fishing outing at a pond in Bowling Green. (THE BLADE/JETTA FRASER)

He’s experienced it firsthand, whether it’s going to a retreat with his son or building a car for the Pinewood Derby. (Together they created one called the Crocodile Hunter, named for the late Steve Irwin, who filmed nature programs, that finished second in the den a few years ago.)

“It’s a different way of interacting together, because we’re not at home doing things around the house,” said Mr. Kleman, who does custodial work part-time but is mainly a stay-at-home dad.

“I get to see him in different situations,” he continued. “I get to see different aspects of his personality.”

Mr. Kleman works closely with his son as part of his den, then oversees larger issues as head of the pack, which includes four dens. There are retreats and community service projects, such as visiting nursing homes and cleaning up parks.

“We do a lot of things for the community. Hopefully that rubs off on the kids,” he said.

That’s another part of the equation for these dads — rubbing off on other people’s kids too. Mr. Nichols, from the National Center for Fathering, said it’s important to look for opportunities for these children to grow by asking about school or other elements of their lives.

“If they don’t have a father or father figure, there are great opportunities for you to provide them with something they don’t have — an encouraging word, sensitivity to something that they’re struggling with that you can help with ...,” he said.

Gerry Kane, a father of two adult children, found a way to do this by getting involved in Big Brothers Big Sisters, befriending a young man from the Old West End named Justin Baker. A defensive lineman at Start High School, Justin, who has two younger sisters and a single mom, had been looking for a big brother for years.

“I wanted to do something,” said Mr. Kane, 54. “I let him know that we’re always going to know each other.”

Mr. Kane, who divorced and is now remarried, said he jumped at the opportunity to be Justin’s Big Brother, connecting with the promising young man because of his own background growing up in a similar environment. They talk about once a week and hang out at sporting events, restaurants, and Mr. Kane’s home in Ottawa Lake, Mich., where there is a pond with fish.

Getting Justin a taste of nature is important to Mr. Kane, so he’s delighted to expose him to the sights and sounds of birds, turtles, and frogs that were unfamiliar to him.

“All they hear by his door is cars coming by,” Mr. Kane said.

It’s the same love for nature that he instilled in his daughter, Rebecca Whitacre, 25, of Kettering, Ohio.

“He really helped inspire, I would say, my desire to be outside,” she said. “I don’t mind the bugs, the mud ... I enjoyed camping. We enjoyed making fires. He taught me a lot about trees and bugs and stuff.”

Mr. Kane, who works at Chrysler’s Toledo Machining Plant in Perrysburg Township, has tried to teach that and more to Justin, who wants to go to college and pursue a career in paramedics and registered nursing.

Mr. Archambeau has made similar efforts to impart his expertise to a younger generation.

As a first base coach, he gets to revel in heart-warming moments, like when one kid scored his first run of the year and said it was the greatest day of his life.

As a father figure — and friend — he tries to do more.



Justin Baker, left, and his Big Brother Gerry Kane, have fun catching bass at Mr. Kane’s Ottawa Lake, Mich., home. (THE BLADE/ANDY MORRISON)

“Baseball’s a sport where there’s time in between, whether you’re doing a drill, stretching, playing catch ... I make a point to ask them what’s going on in their life,” he said.

“I’ve had some kids on our team who talk about issues with their parents possibly getting divorced and stuff like that,” he said. “That’s where you just become a friend of theirs.”

Contact Ryan E. Smith at: ryansmith@theblade.com or 419-724-6103.

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