

THE DEWITT MIRACLE LEAGUE FIELD:

Making Dreams Come True for Youth Athletes with Disabilities

By: Tina Berisha

For many children, it isn't summer until they are swinging a bat and running the bases while enjoying America's favorite pastime. Growing up, many dream about playing in a stadium under the lights for a cheering crowd. Thanks to CASE Cares, the Miracle League of Mid-Michigan (MLMM) and the DeWitt Area Recreation Authority (DARA), that dream has become a reality for Lansing area children with physical or cognitive challenges.

On May 14, 2012 more than 60 youth, surrounded by the Michigan State University baseball team, MSU coach Jack Boss and stands full of fans, stepped out onto their new baseball field designed especially for them during a grand opening celebration. The rubberized field has bases painted on the surface; the design eliminates dirt, rocks and other obstacles allowing those using wheelchairs, walkers or crutches to safely travel the field. According to DARA Director Clay Summers, there was not a dry eye in the house – who said there's no crying in baseball?

"As athletes, we tend to take some things for granted," said Boss. "To see those young people playing the game of baseball that night really hit home for all of us," said Boss. "To see those kids overcome so many obstacles and to see the courage they have was almost overwhelming."

"The [MSU players] were great," said Summers. "They were getting down on the ground, helping the kids play the game in every way. When Coach Boss told them it was time to get on the bus after the game, nobody moved, they wanted to stay on the field."

The field was proposed by CASE Cares, a volunteer non-profit group affiliated with CASE Credit Union. The group approached DARA about housing a Miracle League Field in one of their parks, and the Authority decided Valley Farm Park would be the perfect place. The project included bleachers, a new concession stand and upgraded bathrooms with an automated-lift changing station.

CASE Cares was able to raise \$58,500 toward the nearly \$700,000 project. DeWitt Township raised \$224,000 from donations and fundraisers and was awarded a \$394,200 grant from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund.

The Miracle League is operated through a contract between DARA and the MLMM. DARA manages leagues playing on the field, registering athletes, helping form teams, ordering equipment and uniforms and staffing the games. DARA invoices the Miracle League at the end of the season for costs associated with running the league.

Summers says that the outpouring of support from the DeWitt community and Great Lansing area and partnerships with MMML and CASE Cares is what made the Miracle League Field possible.

"People and businesses have given their time and money to help support the kids," he said. "Without those relationships and connections from such a broad group, we would not have had the success we have had."

Phase two of the development will include a scoreboard, parking expansion, lights and the expansion of the outfield, with hopes of leagues for adults with disabilities as well. There are also plans to upgrade the park's playground to ensure it is universally accessible to all.

Visit www.miracleleagueofmidmichigan.org to learn more about the Miracle League of Mid-Michigan. More information about the DeWitt Area Recreation Authority can be found at www.dewittrecreation.org.

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LEFT: Construction of the Miracle League Field. Photo courtesy of the DeWitt Area Recreation Authority.

RIGHT: Photo Option 1: A MSU Baseball Player assists a Miracle League athlete during the grand opening event on May 14, 2012.

