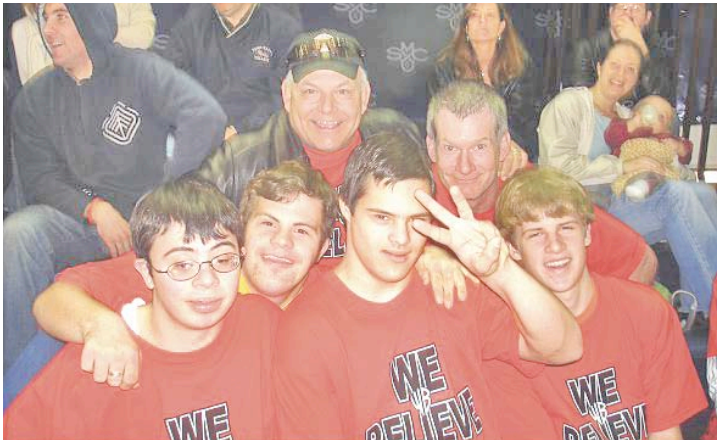


Local Grad Student/Coach Reaches Out to Kids with Special Needs By Jennifer Wake



Special Needs kids and family members cheer on the Gaels on Jan. 19 Photo Andrew Verducci

When Saint Mary's College graduate student Andrew Verducci accepted a request to add two developmentally disabled basketball players to his 8th grade roster at Orinda Intermediate School (OIS) last year, he saw it as a way for him and the other players to learn about the struggles and successes of children with special needs. But that was only the start.

OIS Athletic Director Mike Agers approached Verducci to see if he would be willing to add Spencer (who has autism) and Daniel (who has Down Syndrome) to his basketball team. Verducci said he was 'up to the task.' Although Daniel had played on a Special Olympics basketball team before, neither player had ever played on a team with their typical peers.

"The team greeted them with open arms," Verducci said. "My message to the team was, Daniel and Spencer are just like you guys and they will be treated as every person should be treated: with respect."

Although Daniel and Spencer's mothers told Verducci their sons could sit out (they were just happy to be part of the team), Verducci said: "If they're on my team and in uniform, they're going to play no matter what."

Near the half of game one, Verducci looked down the bench and called out Daniel's name. "He looked up at me and gave me this look of shock," he said. "I explained to him that he was going in. He paused, and just gave me the biggest smile and said, 'Thank you.' When he checked into the game and ran on the court, the crowd ignited." Later it was Spencer's turn.

With one minute left in the game, Verducci told Spencer he was going in. "When he entered the game, instead of going to where he was supposed to, Spencer decided to shake everyone's hand and ask how they were doing. Before I went to remind him where he was supposed to be, I stopped to admire him. He showed me how to cherish the moment."

Over the course of the season the team bonded with the two players. "There were games that we were down by 20 points, but that never stopped [the team] from cheering on Daniel and Spencer," Verducci said.

At a game against Stanley Middle School, Spencer had a moment to shine.

"The goal for my team was to get Spencer the ball so he could make his first shot. When the ball came to him, everyone shouted to shoot it, but he missed. The whole crowd groaned," Verducci said. "Even the players from Stanley understood. When they received the rebound, they would pass it to Spencer because they wanted to be part of the moment also."

Finally after a few more failed attempts, the ball went in. "There was a huge roar from the crowd. It was like the 49ers had just won the Super Bowl."

After the season ended, Verducci created a program called "We Believe – Every Little Bit Helps," to bring that same excitement to more children with developmental disabilities. On Jan. 19, Verducci invited 19 children with special needs and their families to join him at Saint Mary's College for dinner, to cheer on the Gaels men's basketball team, and participate in the half-time free-throw program.

Word spread since then. Last Saturday, nearly 50 people donning "We Believe" t-shirts attended the SMC game. Six volunteers helped out: four Saint Mary's students and two Campolindo High School students – including Jacob Moebius, a former OIS basketball player. "This is a chance for these children to do things every child should do," Verducci said. "We hope to take trips to San Francisco, Sacramento, go to science museums and have days in the park. We don't want to do just sports because not all the children are into sports."

Verducci donated the money for the tickets and t-shirts for the first two events, and hopes to get financial support from local businesses in the future. The SMC athletic department gave Verducci discounted tickets and the SMC food services director, Matt Carrol, provided the pre-game meal at no charge. "It showed me that Saint Mary's supports me 100 percent."

"I knew there was a need for programs for these children, but after the children and parents showed up for the first event, I realized how big the need was," Verducci said. "After the game I had a handful of parents just shaking my hand and asking how to join. They think I have touched these children's lives, but as I have learned, it is these children who have touched mine."

On Jan. 30, the OIS Bulldogs held their home opener and Verducci continued his tradition of inclusion. Two new players (both with special needs) sit among the others, uniforms on, ready to play.

For more information about the We Believe program, contact Andrew Verducci at lilducci@aol.com.