

Lacrosse players help to build dreams off the field

By Barbara Ann Homick
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Imagine a lacrosse team wielding shovels instead of lax sticks, using a downtown street as its field of play, and shooting toward a goal of community service rather than the opponents' cage.

It may sound unusual, but that was the case last week when the Nazareth College men's lacrosse team offered to lend a helping hand to Flower City Habitat for Humanity, a not-for-profit organization that coordinates volunteers to build affordable housing for the poor.

The Golden Flyers finished 11-5 last season, won the Eastern College Athletic Conference championship, and ended the year ranked No. 10 among Division III teams in the National Collegiate Athletic Association poll.

Last week they proved they were winners off the field by helping build three low-income houses on the corner of Rochester's Scio and Weld streets.

Habitat for Humanity predominantly consists of volunteers with chapters in 350 cities nationwide. According to Bill Gavett, executive director for volunteer activities in Rochester, construction on the houses began on Sept. 1, with a scheduled completion date of Dec. 1.

Gavett said that many church, civic and private groups offer to volunteer their services for the organization. But he noted he was especially thankful for the lacrosse players' efforts because help during the week is hard to find.

Coach Scott Nelson, who has guided the Nazareth lacrosse since its establishment in 1985, admitted that he originally thought about getting his team involved with the Habitat project last year. "We were just too lazy," he said.

But when Father Paul English, college chaplain, approached Nelson about the project this year, the coach was eager to get his team involved.

"Once we had someone to do the organizing, it was a lot easier," Nelson said. "Campus ministry really got it going."

As part of College Jamboree Week, other schools in the Rochester-area committed to send volunteers during the week of Sept. 24-29. Nazareth was one of only a few colleges to send an entire athletic team to the building projects, however.

Each of the team's 40 players committed to work one of the three four-hour shifts on Sept. 25. It took some juggling between classes and other responsibilities, Nelson said, but every player showed up to put in his time.

"They (the lacrosse players) were a big chunk of our group, an important part,"

said Nazareth senior Debbie Smith, campus coordinator for Habitat for Humanity.

Nazareth students were recruited for the project during an information day the first week of school.

Although several students did not report to the site for their shifts, about 50 students — excluding the lacrosse players — committed to work at specific times. Smith said the lacrosse players from Nazareth gave the East Avenue college a significant presence on all three shifts on Sept. 25.

Several players had worked in construction before, but building skills were not a prerequisite for the job. Senior Rich Pierpont, who worked at the site from 4-7 p.m. on Sept. 25, had previous building experience. He helped lift trusses for the roof, dig holes for porches and pipelines, and put in stucco installation for the foundation.

Pierpont noted that the "professional construction workers who knew what they were doing" showed the volunteers what to do. By the time he finished his shift, the house was totally enclosed except for the roof.



Defenseman Rich Petersen tries his hand with a circular saw.



Nazareth College freshman Steve Smith (left) maneuvers a post-hole digger as part of his team's commitment to Flower City Habitat for Humanity.

The Nazareth senior said he was impressed by the community's interest in the project.

"There was a guy there who was working really hard. I think he might be planning to live there because he had a real vested interest in the house," said the Putnam Valley native, a midfielder who has been playing lacrosse for eight years. "Little kids were even there, doing what they

could, like raking dirt."

Pierpont said he had a satisfied feeling after his shift, knowing that he had helped people who needed assistance. "It was good to see that we were cleaning up Rochester," said Pierpont, who is majoring in business and marketing. "It also feels good to tell people what we have done."

Teammate Carl Jutzin worked the early shift from 8 a.m. to noon, putting up second-floor walls. The junior midfielder said

it is important for the team to help others.

"It's good for people to know that there are people as a team that they can rely on. You know what it's like to have people help you when you need it," observed the Rush native.

Nelson and his four assistants — Mike Kesselring, Chris Tedeschi, John Gebhardt and Dave Basile — supervised the players throughout the day.

Junior Ron Davis, who spent his shift digging holes and moving boards, said he thinks college students have give-and-take relationships with the communities in which they attend school. The Rochester native said he wanted to pay the community back for its support of Nazareth.

"People come out and support us in our games, so we want to go out and support people in the community," he said.

Freshman Cam Bomberry, a native of Ontario, Canada, said he had fun doing something worthwhile. The political science major was happy to enhance his team's reputation, but said that he got involved for more important reasons.

"Helping the needy — that's what is all about," Bomberry said.

Building friendships was an important part of Jared Smith's work. A freshman business student, Smith said he became closer to his teammates while working.

"Sometimes it's as important to know each other off the field as much as on," he said. "We become better friends that way."

He added that volunteer work is a great way for the community to learn about the Nazareth lacrosse team. "It's a good way for them to know that we are here. The team is putting in an effort as part of the school, and as part of the school we are part of the community," said Smith, a Rochester native.

At a small college everyone knows each other so most of the team "hangs out together," said freshman Steve "Beaver" Smith, a Bishop Kearney graduate who said he would like to help out again.

Smith and the rest of his teammates will soon get a chance to help out again, as Nelson is planning to volunteer his team to work with mentally handicapped children and adults at the School of the Holy Childhood.

Lacrosse players also volunteered their time moving furniture and loading cars at the Sisters of Saint Joseph's garage sale on Sept. 23.

Nelson said it is important for his players to take part in activities outside of playing sports and going to school. Since their involvement in volunteer work as a team, Nelson said he has noticed his players working harder in practice.

"I think they appreciate more what they have," Nelson said.

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