

Teen puts volunteer focus on kids

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

CHILI — Pre-game warm-ups at Davis Park find Chris Brhel busily attending to his coaching duties. Baseballs fly at him from all directions, but the 18-year-old simply smiles and gathers up the ones he can't catch. When he lobbs them back, they're usually caught with a struggle, dropped or missed completely.

Yet Chris offers up a steady flow of encouragement, not criticism, when miscues occur. On a recent Friday, as one of his tosses eluded a little girl, he shouted "bad throw," lest she hold herself accountable. Throughout this stream of activity he kept up a cheerful banter with the players, asking them their birthdays and how old they are. Their replies were accompanied by wide grins.

That's how Friday evenings have gone over the last several summers for Chris. He volunteers with Chili Challenge, a community baseball program for young people with special needs. All of Chili Challenge's athletes have some sort of disability, from Down syndrome and cerebral palsy to autism and emotional disorders. Some players even compete in wheelchairs or on crutches.

Chris began his commitment with Chili Challenge about 10 years ago through his parents, Richard and Jeanné, who are still involved in the program. The league's overriding emphasis, Chris said, is having a good time rather than competing. That means not becoming impatient with athletes who, for instance, hit the ball but forget to run. Chris also

Youth

recalled one girl who refused to take her at-bat unless she could bring her stuffed animal to the plate with her.

"You can't get mad at them. They're just little kids having fun," he said.

Despite the players' athletic limitations, Chris said their passion and knowledge of the game is as strong as any baseball fan's. "This is the sport they love to watch on TV, so they know baseball. They know all the stats and have their favorite players," he said.

Chris said he and a good friend, Jeff Rose, have enjoyed not only coaching in Chili Challenge but also working with youngsters as religious-education instructors at their parish, St. Pius Tenth in Chili. Chris, who has taught religious education for four years, remarked that his class of first-graders this past year stretched his teaching ability as he explained the Holy Trinity.

"The concept of three in one, that took a good two hours," he said. Chris added that he's taken similar care in conveying the spiritual meaning of Christmas and Easter, encouraging his students to look beyond Santa Claus and gifts, or the Easter Bunny and Easter baskets. "You just teach them slowly how religion works into it," he said.

Working with young people definitely requires patience and a positive attitude, and Chris seems eminently qualified in both areas.



During warm-ups, Christopher tosses a ball to Chris Hewitt (left), Nancy Hewitt and Brian DiCesare.



Leila Navidi/Catholic Courier

Christopher Brhel pitches June 27 to a participant in Chili Challenge, a community baseball program for special-needs children.

"I've been pretty patient my whole life, so it's kind of worked out," he said. "I've only gotten mad maybe twice in my whole life."

From time to time, Chris has actually managed to blend his two volunteer roles: According to Ann Hastee, faith-formation director at St. Pius Tenth, Chris has encouraged confirmation candidates to become involved in Chili Challenge baseball.

This fall Chris will begin college at the University of Buffalo, where he plans to major in pre-medicine.

The recent Gates-Chili High School graduate is a National Honor Society student as well as a fine athlete, ranking among the best in Section 5 in the indoor and outdoor pole vault this past year while setting school records in both events. He will continue his track exploits at UB.

Based on his service record with children thus far, it's hardly surprising that Chris is eyeing a career as a pediatrician.

"I really like any little kids in general," he said.