

CREATE A GIVING CULTURE IN YOUR GYM

By Lainy Carlaw, Pittsburgh Northstar Girls Assistant Head Coach

In 2005, three major events happened in my life: I became mother to a toddler; I learned of the genocide in Darfur; and Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans.

I looked at what I had around me—my beautiful baby, my health and my home, and a gym full of talented, amazing gymnasts, who despite their best intentions had no idea how lucky they were. How easy it is, even as adults, to forget until things like Darfur happen, and we hear about thousands of innocent women and children suffering. I knew then that my life could not just be about teaching cartwheels.

In 2005, we hosted a “Quarters for Darfur Festival.” During the month leading up to it, we collected \$5

worth of quarters from each gymnast and then would award gymnasts quarters for positive attitudes in the gym and for showing appreciation. The team with the most quarters won a team party. Out of this game, our Level 7 team started a tradition that continues to this day: they line up after each practice and not only say a “team cheer” but end it with “thank you, coaches.”

Our Festival invited the community into the gym to do activities for a quarter each. We had basket raffles and a gym-wide flea market. We got great publicity and our congressman even came! At the end of the day, we raised \$6,500. Two months later, our Level 9 team placed third at the

Pennsylvania state meet (missing first by just one tenth), and we took four girls to J.O. Nationals — our best showing ever!

Our charity venture was met with 100% support from my boss, who also happens to be my mother, and about 85% support from the parents. Of course, there were those who were not immediately on board, but I not only stayed the course, I listened to their concerns and suggestions. After the Darfur Festival, a few parents asked if they could have a say in what causes we were supporting. Thus, we started an open team fund. We have events. We raise money. And any gymnast, parent, or coach can have an input on which charities our efforts support. Since then, in just the last few years, we have given thousands



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of dollars to Red Cross, Make-a-Wish, Children's Miracle Network, and other worthy non-profits.

On National Gymnastics Day, we charge \$5 for a fun day of gymnastics activities and hold a handstand challenge where the kids bet their parents, friends, and neighbors how long they can balance in a handstand.

On September 11 each year, we do a canned food drive, make care packages for Ronald McDonald House, and write letters in honor of the victims and the heroes of that day. Last year, we did team posters where the girls wrote goals and then dedicated their season to one of their heroes. Many of the gymnasts chose their own parents, the troops, or a parent in the gym who was battling cancer. When you set them free, it is so touching to see how sensitive kids really are and how much they want to help.

If you are looking to create a giving culture in your gym, there are many things you can do. We have used leotard sales,

performances, bake sales during recitals and competitions, and a strength test that our older gymnasts volunteer for in the spring.

Most recently, when we found out Will Pilarski, a six-year-old in our gym, had cancer, a teen gymnast had the idea to make "Willpower" t-shirts. We raised \$2,600 for the "Willpower fund" almost instantly. Last season, we had enough money in our "caring kids" bank account for the "Pink Meet Challenge," our gymnasts hosted a teen "Party in Pink" easily covering the \$500 bench mark. The party was not only fun for the kids but also helped raise enrollment in the Parkour program as teens saw how much fun being in a gym is.

Let's be honest. I am a coach. I love the thrill of the challenge and excitement of competition. My job is to make gymnasts the best they can be. I get paid to help gymnasts improve and succeed and I do it with passion. But we see these kids way too often to be teaching just gymnastics.

If we want to be role models, we must

walk the walk. If we want them to know respect, discipline, and perspective, we have to engage them. So many programs are doing great work, and I applaud their efforts. When I see more and more charity meets, like The Pink Meet, popping up, I get excited and inspired that others want to use gymnastics as a source for doing good in the world. And to those who are not yet, I



say that you can, and you should!

Our charity efforts have not taken away from our gymnastics. Quite the opposite: it has made us stronger. We have gymnasts competing in college: one went to Haiti this summer as an athlete volunteer, and another, a cheerleader at Harvard, spent a month in China working in an orphanage for the blind. Helping them become college athletes was great but knowing they are out there making a difference is even better!

Thirty-five years ago the Pittsburgh Northstars started something special at Jewart's Gymnastics. Our older parents, through their support and leadership, have kept it going and the newer and younger parents are proud to be a part of it. We have 150 girls, boys, and rhythmic athletes on our team and over 1,100 students. Some might come for the tricks, but when they leave, they will go out into the world knowing so much more. We only create five Olympians every four years, but together, we can create thousands of good people. ✧

Lainy is the second-generation coach of the Pittsburgh Northstars. As a former gymnast, she helped raise funds for USA for Africa, the Western PA Heart Association and many other causes. Now, she is the community relations director and head of the Caring Kids program. Her husband, Scott, is the boy's program director. She has two gymnasts, Koda and Pax.

