

Chelsea Community Schools' Unsung Heroes

By Mary Dickson and Alvaro Pinzon

It's 4 p.m. and the presence of local Chelsea kids echoes through the Williams School gym as Bruce Harrison assembles his motley group of children for floor hockey practice. Many are dragging in blue and yellow hockey sticks and pucks as they prepare for practice and the upcoming intramural games. Excitement thunders from the diverse mix of Chelsea kids of all different heights, sizes, genders and ages, but they all listen closely to Coach Harrison. "It's about playing tough and fair, but having fun," Harrison says, "and winning comes after, because it's only a game."

This is not typical practice for the Chelsea Community Schools Floor Hockey team. It's an hour and a half rally of the best players preparing for the final game of the four intramural hockey teams that will conclude a very successful season. "This is it," yells Harrison. "You've got to play tough and you've got to go hustle."

This is merely the beginning for the youth programs of the Chelsea Community Schools (CCS) initiative. The final floor hockey intramural game held November 15th was just one of the many hidden assets at CCS. Created by the community and for the community, CCS serves as an outlet for kids and their families alike with an array of courses, ranging from cooking to art. Essentially, CCS extends the network of support kids receive at home and at school and helps provide valuable learning opportunities. According to Ray Bell, one of CCS' many parents and volunteer referee, "Most kids want to be coached and paid attention to with positive reinforcement."

With programs like floor hockey, children learn to work together for a common goal, and for this team that's teamwork. The teams encourage the kids to focus on effort, learning and sportsmanship rather than winning. Coach Harrison has been coaching in the surrounding Chelsea area for 23 years and continues to lend his athletic abilities to a variety of after schools sports offered at Chelsea Community Schools. "Playing sports keeps the kids off the street and out of trouble," explains Tony Cuellar, a volunteer coach and parent. "There are too many negative things going on in the streets and these activities keep them on the right track because they have no time for anything else." Yet, without the parents, these activities would not have the support or the manpower to continue.

The Weed and Seed program in Chelsea, under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Justice, helps revitalize the city and creates opportunities for continuing education. CCS, by offering a variety of classes and athletic activities, complements the program's mission to work with young and their families to promote leadership in the community. Thus, with money from the Weed and Seed initiative, CCS affords to make use of the state of the art facilities at the Williams Middle School. Bea Cravatta, director of CCS, explains, "With so many cuts in the after school programs, the classes and sports teams offered at CCS are invaluable to Chelsea's youth."

The parents are the one who ultimately keep CCS running smoothly and help keep the kids motivated. Children see the volunteer parents as role models from the stands where

many watch practices and games to cheer on their children. Many parents offer support by becoming team coaches and referees while others help arrange end of the year award ceremonies.

Michelle Michaud, whose daughter Jaime is one of the floors hockey team's only girls, attends several of their weekly practices and games. "Parents keep the kids coming back. Cheering them on makes them feel better about themselves, she says.

Parents can attest to the credibility of the programs at Chelsea Community Schools. According to Bell, when you see parents actively participating and cheering from the stands, it lends integrity that something meaningful is really going on here. The parents want to be involved and participate in the recreational environment because they understand how integral after school activities are for their child's development.

"Parents instill confidence and help develop self esteem," says Bell, whose son David is one of the youngest yet most aggressive hockey players. Parents are essentially the unsung heroes of Chelsea Community Schools. They volunteer their time to coach, referee or watch the practices and games.

"The kids see us more than just coaches," Cuellar says. "We talk about personal issues because they really look up to us and sometimes ask for advice."

CCS parents deserve credit because they act on behalf of what is good for the community and their children, not for what is good for their own self-interest. Many acknowledge the invaluable lessons children can learn through playing sports and being part of a team.

"[CCS gives Jaime the opportunity to make] friends, and the more involved she is, the more outgoing she becomes," Michaud says.

For more information on upcoming classes and sports teams at Chelsea Community Schools, please contact 617-889-8638.