

Nine-year-old makes a pitch to give girls a chance to play softball

When Receé McCoy visited every middle school in Kansas City, Kan., this year to pitch her new sports program, some girls asked: What's softball?

That was her first hurdle. The next came when she got the girls onto the diamond and found that many didn't know left field from right, let alone how to scoop up a grounder.

Softball had finally arrived in Wyandotte County in the form of RBI, Major League Baseball's Reviving Baseball in the Inner City program. But it has been no walk in the ballpark.

McCoy, who played third base for her college softball team in Nebraska, spent hours after work this summer teaching them the game. There were no other coaches, no umps — no games.

Some girls didn't have the \$25 registration fee.

So McCoy was stunned a few weeks ago when she got a call from an Olathe mom named Amy Sullivan, a college softball player herself and mother of 9-year-old Riley.

Riley had decided to do something for her community, and Mom suggested she tie it to something she loved. That was an easy choice: softball.

So earlier this summer, Riley and her parents started a nonprofit called Beyond Softball. The mission is straightforward: provide girls in urban neighborhoods the equipment, mentors and money needed to play softball.

"I just want more softball players to get gloves and their own stuff ... so they can play," Riley says.

Beyond Softball's first public event, an equipment drive on Sunday, will benefit McCoy's RBI players.

"This is totally what I needed," says McCoy, an accountant for Polsinelli Shughart law firm on the Country Club Plaza. "Riley is such a unique little girl. She's just a kid who wants to help others before she helps herself."

'Get it, get it, get it!'

Perhaps it was third-grader Riley's destiny to love softball. Her grandpa coached. Her mom played. Her dad coaches her team.

She's new to pitching, but already the little southpaw looks like a windmill in her windup. She can fling a fat softball a respectable 40 miles an hour.

"Riley ... is better than a lot of my 14-year-olds," marvels McCoy.

For the first practice of the fall season this week, Riley and her Crunch teammates hit a baseball field in Olathe. Riley wore her signature sparkly red headband.

That's about as girly-girl as she gets, says her mom, who handed out the season's new T-shirts. The girls carried new red-and-black equipment bags embroidered with their names and uniform numbers.

With their three coaches, including Riley's dad, Chris, the girls spent an hour on drills, throwing, catching and fielding grounders and fly balls. The coaches' directions rang out over passing traffic and the white noise of restless cicadas.

“Come to the ball!” “Get it, get it, get it!” “Let’s go. Hustle, hustle!”

Some fathers stuck around to watch and yell out their own support.

In KCK, many of McCoy’s players had to find their own way to practice, walking or riding their bikes to the field at 53rd Street and Parallel Parkway.

The once-abandoned ballpark is now a home for the new RBI chapter in Wyandotte County, thanks largely to the efforts of one man, Cle Ross, a former minor league player.

While Ross worked on the baseball side of the program, McCoy got softball up and running.

But with limited resources, they spent more time and energy on baseball, McCoy says. Summer baseball attracted 300 players, and coaches and parent volunteers.

The softball program, though, had 65 girls and no adult volunteers other than McCoy.

“This year was really a learning year for us. Now we know what the challenges are going to be next year,” McCoy says. “My main thing is, if we do this for the boys, we need this for the girls. There are so many girls in KCK who just don’t even have a role model in their lives, so that was big for me ... that everyone has an opportunity.”

‘Bigger than just themselves’

Other than money and equipment, Beyond Softball is hunting for volunteers to serve as role models for McCoy’s players.

Paige Ladenburger, a 19-year-old nursing student at Emporia State University and a pitcher on the women’s softball team there, has signed on.

Growing up in Topeka, Ladenburger became a friend of the family when she played softball for Riley’s grandfather. (Riley’s middle name is Paige, after her.)

Riley spent hours watching Paige play softball.

“That’s kind of what piqued her interest in the beginning, watching the older girls play,” Amy Sullivan says.

Ladenburger plans to spend time working with the players in KCK next year and just might get her Emporia State teammates to help, too.

“From the get-go we did not want this to be a ‘Riley Sullivan’ thing,” Amy Sullivan says. “We want this to be something that brings all of Kansas City fast-pitch together, to bring all these girls together off the field to support something bigger than just themselves.”

Beyond softball, you could say.

Riley will get to meet some of McCoy’s players at Sunday’s drive. Next year, McCoy wants to get grade-school girls as young as Riley out to play.

She’s already dreaming big. Two hundred girls! Enough for teams!

“On opening day, we hope to be up and running,” McCoy says. “Just like the boys.”