

Wranglers hit the floor running in 2013

Written by Don Mann

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Staff Photo/Don Mann Gideon Piccora is a one-man fast break, chased from behind by Spencer Gillett, left, and his brother Gabe Piccora during the Northshore Wranglers' basketball night Thursday at Wellington Elementary in Woodinville. Which team won among the yellows and the blues did not matter and nobody kept score.

What mattered most, what really mattered, was the sound of sneakers squeaking on the hardwood, the grunts of effort and the collective squeals of glee when a basket was made — and several were made on both sides.

This was pure human goodness at its best as the Northshore Wranglers ran up and down the Wellington Elementary School gym floor on basketball night last Thursday.

Young kids, local developmentally disabled kids of all sorts, shapes and sizes were there, and they were jazzed. They were playing ball and they were happy.

It was a sight to behold.

Perhaps what really mattered most of all was the simple joy of being there.

Cole Caplan has been there for the Wranglers since the year 2000, a dozen years ago, back

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when they were called the Woodinville Wranglers, an organization founded in 1998.

“It started as a Special Olympics track program and remained that way for the first four years,” Caplan said at the Northshore Health and Wellness Center (HWC), an offshoot of the Northshore Senior Center in Bothell last week.

“We added bowling in 2004, added basketball in 2006 and then added supplemental programs like dance and some social programs on a limited basis.”

The Wranglers worked happily out of the Carol Edwards Center in Woodinville until the end of 2010, when the then-Woodinville City Council decided to scrap its entire recreational program because of budget woes.

With nowhere else to go, the Wranglers were rescued by Northshore Senior Center director Gary Kingsbury, who offered space and a safe haven for kids in need.

The city of Woodinville, as a parting gift of sorts, offered \$28,000 for the next two years, as well as \$4,000 in equipment. (It recently made another substantial donation for the next two years.)

Caplan, who appreciated his time in Woodinville, was disappointed but took the high road and sees the move to the new Bothell digs, in retrospect, as a good thing.

“It was a positive thing for the program overall,” he said. “We maintained our sports programs and all of our non-sport programs increased significantly: drama, music, art, our skills class. And we also added a swimming program. It really allowed the program to grow, gave it an organization and a space that is really on the same page, in terms of mission, focus and service. The fit with the HWC is very natural and really provides us with the opportunity to serve the community with the whole spectrum of ability and age.”

Of note, the Wranglers comprise, as of 2012, 243 members from 142 households, including 189

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volunteers covering 1,292 hours, and are among the top 10 largest Special Olympics teams in the state of Washington. Two-thirds of the Wranglers are age 21 or under, Caplan said, with the remaining third all under age 40 with one exception.



Staff Photo/Don Mann Wrangler program coordinator Cole Caplan also doubles as coach, here offering hands-on instruction to Katie Couch. So what's up for the Wranglers in 2013?

"One of my main focuses is always sustainability," Caplan said, "really ensuring anything we start continues, so I'm always looking at that whether it's through volunteer support or through fund raising and donations and sponsorship."

He said the annual cost to run the program is about \$70,000 total, which includes supplies, equipment, rentals and travel.

Something new and exciting, he said, is the first annual "All Hands In" dinner auction to be held at the Inglewood Golf Club in Kenmore on September 28. He's also been working with the Northshore Kiwanis Club in something called their "Aktion" club.

"It's an opportunity to connect our Wrangler participants with mentors in the community," he said. "We also continue to be involved with parades and getting folks out and giving them the opportunity to participate and stay active, to get engaged socially."

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Caplan is married but has no kids of his own. His work is a major commitment, in fact a way of life and so much more than a 9-to-5 job.

He was asked what drives him, what brings him to work and puts a smile on his face.

“I’ve always been interested in community,” he said, “being involved and helping others get involved. It’s just always what I’ve done while working with the YMCA, boys and girls clubs, summer camps, mental health facilities and homes ... and now with folks with special needs and disabilities. One of the things I’ve always appreciated working with this population is the commitment of parents and the support they provide. And certainly the adjustment they’ve had to go through with having a child with a disability and learning to live a life with that and making the best life that’s possible. That’s always inspiring to me. It certainly helps put some of the things you and I might find challenging in perspective, when you see the challenges other people face. Also, I find the genuineness very appealing. These people are very genuine. It’s rewarding helping, if only in a small way, to make a person’s life a little bit better.”

He paused, and flashed his magnetic smile. “And, of course, it’s good fun.”

For more information or to donate to the Northshore Wranglers contact Cole Caplan at colec@seniorservices.org.