

Football hero is proud of helping kids

By David Lea
OAKVILLE BEAVER STAFF

For most people winning two Grey Cup championships would be enough accomplishment for one lifetime.

For Oakville resident Brian Warren, this was not the case, particularly when he found out one in six Canadian children live in poverty.

"From playing professional football what I recognized was with all the accolades I accomplished, no one will really care about how many sacks I received, how many cars I was able to drive or homes I lived in," he said.

"I can make a difference through the number of children I impact and so, with the same kind of goals that caused me to play professional football, I now have goals to break the vicious cycle of child poverty."

In 2000 Warren founded Kidsfest, a non-profit organization dedicated to eradicating the root causes of child poverty in Canada.

It seeks to achieve this through a series of programs that attempt to level the playing field and give needy children a chance to succeed and become contributing members of society.



ERIC RIEHL / OAKVILLE BEAVER

SUPPORTING A GOOD CAUSE: Brian Warren, of Kidsfest, seen here at The Running Company, is preparing for the upcoming Kidsfest fundraising gala.

One annual campaign, which helps thousands of children in seven provinces across Canada, sees Kidsfest provide quality backpacks filled with school supplies to children who otherwise would not have them.

Another program, the Running and Reading Clubs, operates in inner city schools across the country.

This 36-week program provides students with fitness activities, mentorship and literacy support in an effort to help children to improve their physical, mental and social health and develop a love of reading.

Warren said children who may have dropped out of school because they have trouble reading stay after their literacy level is enhanced by the program.

The program culminates in a 5 km race and a *Jeopardy*-style reading challenge at the end of the school year in which different Running and Reading Clubs face off against each other.

"We have discovered the kids in our clubs go up a full letter grade and in some of the communities we go into we're seeing a decrease of youth crime by 80 per cent," said Warren.

"In the context of our schools we've also seen gains in the children's

physical fitness, we're seeing them feeling better about themselves than they did before and this gives them an opportunity to engage other resources and opportunities."

Warren said the first Running and Reading Club was established in Oakville with the number of clubs eventually growing to 25 separate clubs located all across the country.

Warren's goal is to increase that number to 55.

"The cool thing about this is most of these kids have never been on a team and if you look at Jane and Finch or the north side of Hamilton, the east side of Vancouver, these places are not known for being the most pristine areas, but when these kids compete and they have their little signs and they're yelling, 'We're Regent Park, We're Regent Park.' They would never say that before, but now they have a sense of pride that, 'I'm coming and representing my community,'" said Warren.

"This opens the door to a greater confidence, a greater sense of self-worth, a greater sense of discipline, they're setting and accomplishing goals. Now they are able to look at things within a context of, 'I can do it.'"

See Kidsfest's page 15

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