

Man on a mission

Ross readies his Fields of Dreams

Former college player has passion for youth baseball, education

by Donovan Corrigan

WyCo CHAMPS!

At first glance, the old Kansas City, Kan., 3-and-2 baseball complex off of 53rd and Parallel Parkway doesn't look like much. Some might even call the two ball fields' eye sores with the high grass, out-of-control weeds and sloped hills.

That wasn't what Cle Ross remembers seeing when he laid eyes on the facility over a decade ago. Ross visualized what the complex could be, and not what it looked like back in 1999 after years of inactivity and neglect. Ross envisioned pristine and manicured ball fields filled with the sights and sounds of the area young people enjoying America's pastime.

"I was a member of the Kansas City Kansas Community College baseball team," said Ross, CEO/Founder of Success Achieved In Future Environments (S.A.F.E). "One day while out jogging with a teammate of mine, we ran by the baseball fields (located at 5325 Parallel Parkway), better known as Wyandotte County 3-and-2.

"To any ordinary person, the complex would have looked decrepit and run-down, but I saw a different vision that day. It was at that point in my life that I made a promise to myself that whenever I completed my playing career that I would return to this area and figure out exactly what it would take to get kids playing on those fields again."

What it would take was a man with Ross' drive, commitment and passion for the rebuilding project. Ross, a former walk-on at KCKCC went onto to earn scholarships at North Central Missouri College and the University of Arkansas-Pine Bluff (Division I) before returning to the area in 2007 to found S.A. F.E., a 501(c) 3 Non-Profit Organization. Ross, 30, went to work fundraising, looking for sponsors/donations and putting in hours of sweat equity to launch a new inner-city youth baseball league.

Ross also sought out people in the community willing to invest their time and energy into preparing the fields for the youth who would eventually play their home games at the complex.

Kansas City T-Bones' head groundskeeper-facilities manager Joey Fitzgerald answered the call. Fitzgerald gave freely of his time and resources to get the two long-forgotten fields playable.

"The opportunity to work with Joey Fitzgerald is a true blessing," Joey is one of the best at what he does which is obvious if you have visited a home T-Bones or Wizards game. We are honored to have him be so kind to donate his time and services towards leading our field renovation project.

Fitzgerald was moved by Ross' desire to provide area youth with the opportunity to play baseball.

"I met Cle last year at Satchel Paige Stadium (in Missouri) when I was doing a similar project there," Fitzgerald said. "I knew that Cle was starting a (youth baseball) program, so I called him to see if he needed some help getting his fields playable.

"I wanted to do it because I enjoy turning fields that are in rough shape into nice fields for kids to play on. After talking with Cle, I shared his vision in making the old 3-and-2 fields something that can be really respected and can be a place for the community to be proud of. The T-Bones take pride in the surrounding community, and want to do

whatever we can to help it out. Cle has a tremendous vision for the youth of KCK, and those fields.”

The work helped 155 area inner-city youth play baseball in the Support Towards Inner City Kids (S.T.I.C.K.S) Little League this summer. The S.T.I.C.K.S program was home to players ranging in age from three to 18 years old. It is the only baseball program within Wyandotte County to offer summer baseball to players ages 14-18.

One of those players was Washington junior Joseph Anderson, who works with Ross several times a week. Anderson said Ross has helped him become a better hitter and all-around baseball player. Ross has also aided Anderson in realizing the value of an education, and goals.

“Cle is a great coach,” Anderson said. “He works and works till you get it. If you ever want to practice, you just call him. He’s always pushing and pushing everyone to be better. He works on the fundamentals of the game more than anything. My goal is to get a college (degree) and play baseball. Coach is always saying go to college, and school is first, then baseball.”

Ross, who played minor-league baseball in the Texas Rangers’ organization, credits baseball for some of his success in life.

“Baseball not only created a financial opportunity for me to receive a college education,” Ross said. “But it also helped cultivate a disciplined, determined and secure self-identity.”

Ross is determined to help area youth have the same type of experiences and opportunities he has been blessed with.

“History shows KCK has some of the best athletes in the metro area,” Ross said. “My job as a coach is to mix that talent with the fundamentals of the game while teaching leadership, mentorship, and encouraging proper academic study skills.

“I am convinced that in KCK, it’s not the lack of inner-city kids wanting to play the game of baseball, but the lack of inner-city kids being having the opportunity to learn the game using quality fields and training facilities. Our motto is ‘They’ve come; now we just need help building it’.”

For more information on the (S.T.I.C.K.S) Little League and the (S.A.F.E) program, visit www.MetroNeeds.org.