

# New Haven Register

## Caring for the Community: Area Colleges Emphasizing Helping Others

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By David Borges

Oct. 5--It's always been a key component of the student-athlete experience, but there seems little doubt that community service among college athletes is on the rise.

A quick look at just last week offers numerous examples:

--For three days earlier in the week, Southern Connecticut State baseball players volunteered at the St. Ann's Soup Kitchen in Hamden, assisting homeless people at the facility in a small group format that will continue through the fall.

--On Friday, about 15-20 student-athletes from **Yale** participated in the school's Bulldog Buddies program, a yearlong effort in which members of various Yale athletic teams interact with kids at the Vincent Mauro Elementary School in educational and athletic activities.

--On Saturday, a group of SCSU softball players participated in the school's "Paws to Read" program, reading to local youths at the New Haven Public Library while a therapy dog named Alek interacts with the children.

--Members of Southern Connecticut's field hockey team wore pink jerseys and socks and had their hair dyed pink to raise awareness for breast cancer.

--A walk to raise money for breast cancer was organized by the New Haven women's basketball team.

--And Yale's student-athletes continued a tradition that dates back more than a half century with Youth Day prior to the Bulldogs' football game with Holy Cross.

--Meanwhile, in a truly touching event over at Quinnipiac, coach Rand Pecknold and just about every member of the hockey team got their heads shaved in a "Blades and Shaves" fund-raising outing.

All proceeds from the event go toward funding cancer research in honor of Brent McCreech, a 6-year-old neighbor of Pecknold's who has bravely battled cancer.

All in a week's work for area college athletes, who seem to be giving back to their communities as much as ever these days.

"I think there's more of a level of consciousness now toward (community service)," Southern Connecticut athletic director Patricia Nicol said. "I think it's more structured, and there's more emphasis put on it from a department standpoint. It always happened, but it happened quietly. It was never articulated as an important component to a student's educational experience."

It is now. Thanks in no small measure to an increased focus at the Division II level, community service (and, more specifically, the idea of community engagement) has practically become vogue among student-athletes. Several area colleges even offer contests for their athletic teams to see who can put in the most community service hours over a given year.

"You're not just doing that good deed, but you're making that connection with the community, bringing them together more," said Austin Michalski, a men's volleyball player at UNH. "You always hear (fellow athletes) say, 'I've got community service on Friday,' and it's not an 'Ugh' kind of thing. They have a good time."

Each fall, UNH's athletic teams rake the leaves of homes in the neighborhood surrounding the school's north campus.

"The athletes really enjoy it, and I know the residents enjoy it," Michalski said. "Just getting out there, doing something like that, it's something at home you don't do much anymore. Plus, you're meeting people who sometimes go to our games. We've had a great response."

#### 'COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT'

When college athletes visit an area elementary school to read to the children or take a youth to a Yale football game as a mentor, it's more than just community service. It's community engagement, the hot new catchphrase that is being espoused by numerous college administrators, no one more than UNH athletic director Debbie Chin.

"Community service is a one-time project," Chin said. "You go in, there's a need, you take care of the need. You

service the community, and when you leave, you're done with that."

Community engagement, on the other hand, has longer-lasting effects.

"There are needs out in our community," Chin said, "so how do we engage our university community to the needs of our communities? It's bringing them to our campuses -- and not just for sports -- and providing them something. If you can start young people with that way of thinking, how important it is for them to succeed in school, make good choices ... that's what community engagement is all about."

For example, the West Haven Parks & Recreation Department hosts a day camp each August. UNH coaches and athletes attend the camp, put on sports clinics, and it is a nice day for everyone involved.

This year, there was a new twist.

"To make it a community engagement experience, we brought them to our campus," Chin said. "We let them run on the football field, play on the tennis courts, meet the Charger mascot. When they were done, we took them over to the Beckerman Recreation Center so they could experience our full campus."

"We're not just an institution that sits on a hill by itself," Chin said. "We're part of the community. If these young people continue to come onto our campus, at some point they may choose to be a student within the community. The university benefits from that, as well."

At Yale, the National Youth Sports Program has been in effect for about 13 years. Each summer, the school hosts a free, five-week camp for inner-city children. Yale provides transportation,

breakfast and lunch, with its studentathletes serving as counselors.

"For New Haven youth, it's a tremendous opportunity to utilize Yale's facilities, engage with students in a college atmosphere," said Jordan Skolnick, a development and community outreach assistant at Yale. "It's something that's tangible, seeing student-athletes being successful."

The youths participate in numerous sports and educational activities throughout the camp. One unique aspect is that inner-city kids get a chance to engage in sports not normally reserved for them, like crew. On a similar vein, Yale student-athletes also help out in Squash Haven and the New Haven Tennis Outreach, a pair of programs that also introduce inner-city youths to sports to which they're not often exposed.

The benefits go both ways.

"For the student-athletes, it's an amazing opportunity to get to interact with New Haven youth who want someone to mentor them," Skolnick said.

And it's not just fostering positive relationships in the surrounding community. A major component of community engagement is establishing good relations within the collegiate community, as well -- i.e., athletes supporting athletes at other sporting events and attending events outside of athletics, too.

#### A DIVISION II IDENTITY

While community service and engagement appears to be on the rise at every level of institution, it has become a particular focal point of Division II programs like New Haven and Southern.

Chin chairs the Division II Management Council and has played a major role in the initiative, which began just a few years ago.

"We were losing membership to DI schools," Chin said. "We were asking ourselves, 'Who are we as Division II?' It was almost like we were the middle child."

Added Nicol: "At Division I, you think of scholarships, the highest level of competition, exposure. Division III is about participation within the educational structure. Division II is betwixt and between -- we have scholarships, we're highly competitive, but at the same time, the word 'balance' has always been affiliated with Division II. The balance of athletics and academics, but there's more to that."

So Division II schools got together and developed a new strategic development platform, "and it's taken off like nobody's business," according to Chin.

One major point of emphasis is creating a positive environment at on-campus athletic events, especially since schools are encouraging youths from the nearby community to attend these games.

"If you bring a kid to campus," Chin said, "you'd better make it a nice event."

That includes maybe having a band playing live music, or holding contests, etc., during timeouts. And, of course, it means good sportsmanship -- by both athletes and fans.

Starting last January at New Haven, one member of each team will come to the middle of the floor or field and read a statement to the crowd, urging such ideals.

By this January's convention, Chin believes, nearly every D-II president will have signed an oath to engage in positive game environment. If a school witnesses a bad experience during a visit to an opponent, that school will call the opposing school's president and hold it accountable.

"I am not going to get a call from my president," Chin said. "The kids understand the importance of this, and that's how it starts. We hope to have an effect on D-I, because D-I needs some help."

#### FRIENDLY COMPETITION

One important thing to remember about the uptick in student-athletes' community involvement is that it's not something that's been forced upon them.

"It's fun, it's a rewarding experience all-around to do those types of things," said Chuck Menke, director of athletics communications at Quinnipiac. "They're not really doing it for any other purpose or to make them look good in the public eye. They do it because they want to do it."

He added that student-athletes often come up to department officials with new ideas, whether it's a teddy bear toss at a hockey game, a toy giveaway at the Yale-New Haven Children's Hospital, or the like.

It's to the point where area schools now have competitions among their athletic programs to see who can do the most community service. At Quinnipiac, it's the Positive Play Program, where teams earn certain amounts of points for each project they do, and the points are tallied up at

the end of the year. Last year, the women's ice hockey team won the award.

At UNH, it's called the Community Service Challenge Cup, where programs "compete" to see who logs the most amount of community service hours. Last year, the women's basketball team racked up the most, with 474.

"We don't really care about the competition of giving back to the community," said senior softball player and Orange resident Monica Savarese. "We've been doing it for years. Winning (the Cup) would be an added bonus, but we do it because it's the right thing to do."

All told, UNH sports teams put in 2,121 hours of community service last year, easily besting the 2006-07 total of 1,132, as well as last year's goal of 1,500. This year's goal is about 2,500.

At Southern, the Community Service Cup is in its first year. It will be awarded to the sports team that amasses the most points from community service-related activities. It's a popular, good-natured competition among the programs.

"I have coaches come up to me and want to know where their team stands, pitching ideas," SCSU sports information director Michael Kobylanski said.

For the record, the women's soccer team is currently in the lead, followed closely by field hockey, men's swimming and diving and women's lacrosse. It's all in good fun, of course, as college athletic departments aim for a higher goal.

"If you hit one kid, one person, and get them thinking differently or change their life by just an act of kindness ... I mean, that's why we're here," Nicol said. "Regardless of what (student-athletes) do

in their lives, they're not going to be able to do it alone. They need to be able to give a hand, as well as take a hand. I think the idea of sharing and just engaging others is a fundamental principle of humanity."