



Jan and Dave Brandon



U-M C.S. MOTT CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL

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# VICTORS & HEROES

At the U-M C.S. Mott Children's Hospital,  
those words describe patients  
and athletes alike.

**A**thletes visiting kids in the hospital is not a new story. The practice goes back at least to Babe Ruth, and probably before. At the University of Michigan, it goes back at least 40 years, when football coach Bo Schembechler began encouraging his players to go to C.S. Mott Children's Hospital on Thursdays, their "light night," not only to brighten the patients' evening but also to learn something about themselves and their responsibilities beyond football.

BY JEFF MORTIMER

But what has happened since appears to be unparalleled. Thursday night visits by athletes have become one of the core traditions of the tradition-laden U-M athletics program. The athletes come from every one of its 27 varsity teams, and the ripple effect of those visits has been breathtaking. Athletes and coaches have become some of Mott's most valuable players: fundraising, providing recreational activities for patients, hosting them at their games, and sometimes developing lifelong friendships.

"We've developed a relationship that's beyond partnership," says Athletic Director David A. Brandon, who played football for Schembechler and was one of the athletes who visited Mott in the 1970s. "It's emotional."

It's also practical. The most conspicuous evidence is that Brandon and his wife, Jan, and former football coach Lloyd Carr and his wife, Laurie, were co-chairs of the fundraising campaign for the new Mott Hospital. But that's only the tip of the iceberg:

- The Brian Griese/Steve Hutchinson/Charles Woodson — all former football players — Champions for Children's Hearts Weekend has raised more than \$4 million over the last five years to benefit the new building and its Congenital Heart Center.
- The annual spring intrasquad football game has raised \$650,000 in the last two years to benefit the Michigan Game Day Experience, an interactive play area for patients and families at the new Mott.
- Proceeds from Mock Rock, an annual comedic talent show organized by the U-M Student-Athlete Advisory Council and the Letterwinners M-Club that benefits Mott, totaled \$80,000 last February — the largest sum in the event's 12-year history.

- For many years before his retirement, Carr sponsored an annual car wash that raised more than \$350,000 for the new Mott Hospital.

One organization shines like a beacon in this sea of selflessness. There can be no doubt that Michigan from the Heart, a nonprofit founded in 1991 by Ed and Leann Bouillion after their then-teenage daughter was treated at Mott for cancer in her leg, has improved the quality of life for more patients and families at Mott in the last 20 years than any other entity outside the Health System itself.

Not only were the Bouillions instrumental in transforming the Thursday night visits from a well-intentioned but *ad hoc* effort into a well-organized and sustained one, but the money Michigan from the Heart has raised, principally through an annual golf outing, has paid for toys, photographic mementos of athletes' visits, game tickets, trips to theme parks and, in general, "anything that seems like it should be done," says Ed Bouillion, whose daughter is now a healthy 30-something working as a commercial pilot.

"We kind of fill the gap," he says. "Maybe it's a wheelchair. Maybe it's phone cards. Sometimes a family is in financial need. You have all these wonderful charities that do the big things. We do the little things."

Some of the most impressive stories illustrating the Athletic Department's impact have roots in the group's activities even if they weren't formally a part of them, and the effects were far from little on the individuals who benefited.

One celebrated example involves Brian Griese, who quarterbacked the football team that won the 1997 national championship. A faithful Thursday night visitor, Griese befriended a young woman who was using a wheelchair after being paralyzed in an accident.

"During one of their visits, she was talking about the fact that she wouldn't be able to participate in her senior prom,"





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recalls Brandon. "Brian asked her if he could take her to the prom. He gets an appropriate van, they get her in her prom dress, and he takes her to her local high school. Every girl in the gym wants to dance with Brian Griese. He says no, she's my date, and picks her up out of her wheelchair and dances with her ... not because he had to or the press was there or it was a sports story, but because he connected with a patient at Mott and decided he wanted to help her."

A decade later, star punter Zoltan Mesko, another Thursday night regular, befriended a young girl who eventually died of cancer. Dan Fischer, director of Mott's Child and Family Life Department, which oversees the athletes' visits, still remembers the note he got from a friend of her family.

"Her family and friends had made wristbands for her with an inspirational message," he says. "They said she gave one of them to Zoltan, and when she was well enough to go to a football game, she could see he was wearing it during the game. It meant the world to her."

"People ask me how we do what we do," Fischer continues, "and I guess I don't have a really good answer, other than to say that watching families and children go through unimaginable circumstances with such resiliency, love and courage is inspiring. To be a part of that is why doctors, nurses, child life specialists, do the things they do. It sounds like Zoltan picked that up the first time he was here."

"It started out being a resume builder to get into business school," Mesko admits, "but after my first visit, I said this should never be used as a resume builder. It was really rewarding. There probably aren't enough words in the English vocabulary to describe the emotions you experience."

Such connections endure and reverberate. Take the trio that sponsors the Champions for Children's Hearts Weekend. Griese is also the founder and president of Judi's House, a children's grief support center in Denver, Colorado. Hutchinson and his wife, Landon, are deeply involved in building a children's hospital in Minneapolis. And

Woodson gave \$2 million to Mott in 2009 to support the construction of the new building and launch the Charles Woodson Clinical Research Fund.

"This has given a lot of these players an experience that they've taken on into their lives since they've left Michigan," says Carr. "It's a beautiful thing to see."

Sometimes those beautiful things are more private. "We had a reunion of one of our teams from 30 or 35 years ago," says Brandon. "They put together a weekend of activities, and as part of that they wanted a bus to go over to Mott. They said, 'If we're going to come back and have a reunion weekend in Ann Arbor, we have to go to Mott.' That kind of says it all to me."

Mott sponsored "Woodson Day" in April and presented him with the first Mott Champions for Children Award, but the Heisman Trophy winner and Super Bowl champion tried to shift the spotlight where he felt it belonged. "To do this is easy for me," he said. "All I have to do is write a check. It's what the patients and family and staff go through that deserves a day."

Woodson's point is well taken, but he and his colleagues do deserve credit for the visits themselves, which aren't as easy as some might imagine.

"Sometimes it's hard for them," says Fischer. "They see some things they're not expecting to see. They think of regular kids sitting in a hospital bed, but these are pretty sick kiddos."

Brian Bush, who was a regular visitor when he played baseball for Michigan in the late 1990s and has been involved with Michigan from the Heart ever since, was one who got an eye-opening experience.

"The first time I visited the kids at Mott, I was a young, invincible 18-year-old kid myself," he recalls. "The first kid I saw had just come back from chemotherapy. He knelt down in the hall and began to throw up blood. Some of the athletes stepped back and didn't know what to do, but I simply bent down and asked him if he was all right. The child looked up and got a smile on his face. Even at one of



Ed Boullion, Dan Fischer, Brian Bush and Andrew Samuels

the most vulnerable times in his life he could muster up a smile. From that moment, I realized the power of this charity. Michigan from the Heart can change people’s lives by making them forget about the tough situation they’re in.”

Bush was clearly undeterred — he’s now a manager in the Department of Neurology — and the same has been true of most of the Thursday night visitors. “It was never something where we as a department had to, or did, pressure them,” says Carr. “It was strictly something that our players embraced on their own. I think that’s probably one of the reasons it’s been so successful.”

**I**hey’re not as easy to measure as the financial benefits, but there’s no doubt in Fischer’s mind that the therapeutic effects have been salutary.

“What the athletes provide is a sense of distraction, normalcy and comfort in an otherwise overwhelming situation,” he says. “There’s more and more research showing the benefits of using play to help kids cope with trauma, stress and anxiety. We’ve known that for years in child psychiatry. Those emotional benefits directly impact their physical well-being as well. We all know anecdotally that if you’re in a better frame of mind, you’re going to recover from illness or injury better, and that’s just as true with kids.”

Andrew Samuels was a 10-year-old bone cancer patient at Mott in 1997 when he had his first encounter with Michigan from the Heart. “Ed Boullion and the athletes and volunteers came into my room and said, hey, would you like a visitor?” he says. “They had me. The athletes were really cool and later let me into their locker room, and signed autographs for me and my family. After awhile, I got to know Ed pretty well and he convinced me to come volunteer for him, particularly at the golf outings at first. Then I started coming up on Thursday nights as well.”

Unlike the athletes, Samuels required some pressure. “I was going to the golf outings for several years, but it took a bit of convincing to go back to the hospital,” he says. “When I was done with my treatment in 2001, the first thing on my mind was, why would I ever want to go back there? But after a little convincing, I realized I did have something to share and it was important to do so.”

As a former patient who is as familiar with hospital routines as he is with Michigan from the Heart, Samuels brings a uniquely valuable perspective to his efforts.

“When I walk in, obviously I’m not like another athlete,” he says. “I’m a little bit smaller and missing a leg, so people kind of wonder. I immediately try to show my relation to the athletes and to the hospital, especially on the seventh floor, which is the cancer floor. People have a lot of questions to ask me, and I have a lot to share.”

With the opening of the new hospital, new signs of the bond between Mott and the Athletic Department will be woven into its fabric: the neonatal care unit named for Brandon’s sons Chris and Nick, the lobby named for Woodson, the pediatric cancer unit named for Carr, the Michigan Game Day Experience interactive play area. What won’t be new is the connection they exemplify, because that’s embedded in the institution’s soul.

“Opening day of the hospital is a special day in the history of the University of Michigan,” says Lloyd Carr, “because it truly has been a team effort to get it done.” **[M]** [MORE ON THE WEB](#) ✦



Lloyd and Laurie Carr

# ‘WE DIDN’T WANT TO NAME THEM AT FIRST ...’

When Dave Brandon’s twin sons, Chris and Nick, were nearing their high school graduation in 1999, they asked their dad if they could take part in senior skip day. “You can skip tomorrow, but I want you to give me the first two hours of the day,” he told them. “Put on some nice clothes and we’ll take a little trip.”

Their destination was the neonatal intensive care unit at Mott Hospital, where they had been rushed shortly after their birth 18 years before. Chris had been stealing blood from his brother in the womb, more than his body could circulate, while his brother was dangerously anemic.

“It’s a very rare dysfunction that only occurs in the case of identical twins,” says Brandon. “As we later learned, the survival rate for premature babies born in Chris’s condition was 30 percent. Nick’s was a bit higher, but he was also in trouble.”

The resident on duty had recently completed a research project on this disorder. “He took one look at them and knew exactly what it was and exactly what to do,” Brandon says. It took weeks to balance their blood levels and make sure their hearts and lungs were functioning properly.

“This doctor just did a phenomenal job, saved them in their moment of crisis, brought them to the point where they left as healthy babies,” he says. “We didn’t want to name them at first because, frankly, we didn’t think they were going to live.”

They were known only as Brandon Boy A and Brandon Boy B until “a nurse said, you know, it’s just about time we named these boys, and that was the moment when I kind of concluded that they were going to make it.”

Now they were back where they started, looking through the same window their father had stood in front of 18 years before. “They had heard stories, but didn’t connect with it directly,” Brandon says. “Now I could tell them here’s where it started. Here are the people who saved your lives. If this wasn’t here, you wouldn’t be alive.”

A nurse appeared and asked what they were doing. After Brandon explained, she asked how old they were. “When I told her, she looked at me and said, ‘Brandon Boy A and Brandon Boy

B.’ She remembered what was wrong with them, how much trouble they were in, then she’s hugging the boys and she’s got tears running down her face. She looks at me and says, ‘They never come back. I’m so appreciative that you brought them back.’ I don’t know who was more emotional, me or her, but it was pretty amazing.”

Brandon says it was “an honor and a privilege” for him and his wife, Jan, to make the gift that ensured that the neonatal intensive care unit in the new Mott will be named for their sons. “The first thing I’m going to do when the new hospital opens,” he says, “is go up to that floor with Nick and Chris and their wives and Jan and celebrate something that’s going to help God knows how many kids and their parents.” —JM



Nick and Chris Brandon