

Preschool Kids And Number One Dads

Education Division's John Gregg is building a Father-Child program that will be chalking up results for a generation.

By Ron Karten

It all seemed like too much for the preschoolers to take in.

Outside the Rose Garden during the hour before the tip off for a recent Portland Trail Blazers and Minnesota Timberwolves game, guys were out there hawking tickets on every corner.

"Who needs tickets?"

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At the same time, Trail Blazer Announcer Jay Allen was on the loudspeakers talking about "Smash mouth basketball," and how the Blazers were "five-and-a-half games behind L.A."

Inside, the first encounter was with the outside ring where vendors hawk everything from dawgs to shirts to shaved ice. Circling that ring for a distance about equal to a trip around the pow-wow grounds, the group found entrance A23 that led to the inner circle where finally, the group saw the basketball court. Darkness was pierced by spotlights that roved and circled and dive-bombed the audience like starlings at a cat. The music swelled. The voice of Jay Allen was still smooth and upbeat. Fans wielding inflated plastic clappers started making a racket.

The usher looked at the tickets and pointed upward toward where the stars should be. It was clear that after the long ride from Grand Ronde and a health stop at Abbey's Pizza in Newberg, this trip was less about going to the Rose Garden and more about going to the top of the world.

For a preschool kid with his dad or granddad or uncle at his side, there is nothing much out there that is closer to heaven than the number 8 seat in the letter K row in the 226th section of the Rose Garden.

"Just the atmosphere was something for him," said Tribal member and Cultural Resources Language Specialist Bobby Mercier about his son, Tribal member Nokoa, who was at the Rose Garden arena for the first time. "He couldn't believe all the people and everything."

All the little faces seemed pre-occupied even when the Blazer establishment shamelessly paraded pets for adoption across the court, but when the cotton candy guy came around with the blue stuff piled as high as a mountain, all those wide eyes got the message and some of them landed a big one.

Most of the dads, granddads and uncles had seen this before, and took requests with gentle reminders about the value of manners and self-control, and though the parent side of these duos and trios might still spring for a tub of popcorn the size of a swimming pool, they were firm about not going for the clappers, not yet, not this trip...

"I had a great time with the kids," said Tribal member and Spirit Mountain Casino employee Mike Colton, who came with Tribal member Nicholas, his son. "It was fun. Far better than going out with the boys. 'Cause you're spending the time with your son."

Nicholas may have missed out on a clapper, but he came home with a foam

'Blaze Claw.' As did Nokoa Mercier.

Ezra Lorenzo Pacheco, there with his granddad, Max Chavez, and Tribal kid, Keeton Walker, there with his uncle, Tribal member Daniel Freeman, applauded when the crowd did, whether it was because the Blazers scored or because the BlazerDancers had a head-rocking number going.

For some reason, little kids all applaud with their fingers splayed while adults, knowing better, keep their fingers together when they clap.

"Every time the people were doing something down there," said Bobby Mercier, "(Nokoa) was hollering at me, 'Look dad, look.'"

All this was just the most recent event in an ongoing Tribal preschool program to keep fathers in the lives of their young children, or to bring them back in.

Regarding a previous trip to Salem for a pizza stop and the movies, Tribal member John Gregg Jr., a Preschool Bus Driver and Aide who started the father-child program, reported that a little girl who hadn't seen her dad in over a month was in for a treat.

"He was there waiting for her across the parking lot," said Gregg. "She was ecstatic to see him. I had to hold her back from running across the park-



Fast Eddie — Tribal member Joey Larsen and his son, Tribal member Eddie, 3, discuss the Blazer strategy during the home team's recent loss to the Minnesota Timberwolves. Portland now hovers above cellar-dwelling Utah in the NBA's Northwest Division.

Photos by Ron Karten

ing lot. She was nothing but smiles. After that, (the father) went home and saw his other daughter that he hadn't seen in over a month.

"That same trip," Gregg continued, "I had a grandfather in tears thanking me because he hardly ever (otherwise) sees his grandson."

"When that happened," he said, "I knew we had accomplished so much more than we ever expected."

The idea for the program came out



Team Spirit — On the floor, the Blazers were not so hot, but the real story was up in the stands where fathers and preschoolers played together with foam claws, buttered popcorn and sweet sodas.

Portland Winter Hawks, the minor league hockey team supported by the Tribe.

"We're going to try to focus on one-on-one involvement," said Gregg, "but when we have extra tickets we give them away."

That wonderful exception policy benefited the Sherwoods this trip. Tribal member Ken brought daughter and Tribal member Trinity, but older brother and Tribal member Isaiah also

got to come along this time, said Gregg.

"I think that the turnout was incredible," said Dave Fullerton, the Tribe's Social Services Manager, who came with Raven Harmon, his girlfriend's daughter.

"How many dads, or grandparents, came out with their children?" he said. "It's a real incredible thing. My hat's off to the Head Start preschool program for putting these types of events together that get kids and their parents out to do something."

Preschool staffers Junelle Fox and Gregg led a group to the Blazer game that included Cultural Resources Education Coordinator Tony Johnson and his son, Sammy, Bobby Mercier and Nokoa, Tribal member Brian Krehbiel and his daughter, Tribal member Kailiyah, Chris Scholton and his son, Ethan Howard, Mike Colton and his son, Nicholas, Tribal member Daniel Mooney and his son, Joseph Benedict, Dan Freeman and his nephew, Keeton Walker, Dmitrio Reyes and his son, Tribal member Jordan, Ken Sherwood and both his daughter, Trinity, and her older brother, Isaiah, Kimball Smith and his son, Tristan, Fullerton and Raven Harmon, Tribal member Joe Larsen and his two sons, Tribal members Eddie and Raymond, Max Chavez and his grandson, Ezra, and Tribal member Peter Grout Jr. and his niece, Tribal member Sydney Dizick.

For Freeman, whose first time seeing a professional ball club play came when the group went to see the Winter Hawks in January, the events have been a watershed experience.

"Seeing our logo on the ice gave me a feeling of worth," he said.

And it works both ways.

"For days after we have these," said Gregg, "that's all these kids talk about. They are so proud that they get to go out with their dads. It really gives them a sense of self worth."

"I still have kids telling me how good the movie was they got to see."

The lack of a positive male role model in the life of a child has been linked to many behavioral issues. For the four in ten youth who currently are growing up without a father in the household, there is a dramatically increased likelihood that they will grow up poor, abusing drugs and alcohol, or be a high school dropout. They will have a suicide rate ten-times higher than children who grow up with dads in the home, according to Patrick Mitchell, the 'Down to Earth Dad' who visited the Tribe in 2003 (See *Smoke Signals*, 4/15/03) with this subject in mind.

Next year, Gregg's own son, Tribal member John Gregg III, joins the preschool program, and thanks to his dad, the experience is likely to be loaded with valuable extras.

One might hope that the disoriented Blazers will be back on the trail by then, but the beautiful thing is, for a group like this, it doesn't make a bit of difference. ■