

Gloves with Love Goes Rural

When brothers Louis and Koreon Grier heard they were traveling to the small town of San Pierre, Indiana to do community service work, they pictured a community that looked just like Toledo.

“I was surprised at all the open space there,” says 11-year-old Koreon. “All the farms and cornfields just stretching out.”

“I thought it would look a lot more urban, more inner city,” agrees 16-year-old Louis. “I guess I just didn’t know what farm country looked like. And I sure didn’t think there was going to be anything like blueberry picking.”

Indeed, blueberry picking was just one of the many activities that opened the eyes of the four boys who were first-time participants in the fourth annual IBC community service week held in conjunction with CROPS (Community Rural Outreach Program). In addition to the Grier brothers, Isaiah King and Gerard Chambers also made their first trek to San Pierre in July. Second-timers Trayvone Mathis and Cody Houghtalling also joined in, Houghtalling in his new role as Coach Harry Cummins’ part-time assistant.

“I was surprised at the blueberry picking my first time there,” says Trayvone of his trip last year. “I’d never seen anything like that... I kinda over ate.”

As has been the case in the past, IBC’ers who participated in this year’s San Pierre program earned their spot by garnering the most points in the boxing club’s summer reading program.

“We set goals at the beginning of the summer and the kids earn points for the number of pages they finish, with bonus points for book reports,” explains Coach Cummins.

The IBC-CROPS partnership began in 2003, when Cummins participated in a workshop on grant writing at the University of Toledo. Impressed with the workshop instructor – successful grant writer Beverly Santicola -- Cummins offered to hire her to write grants for the IBC. Unsure, Santicola agreed to visit the IBC.

“The very minute you walk into that gym, you know it’s a special place,” says Santicola of her first visit. “But I told Harry that to get grant money, it would have to be for something more than just the boxing.”

Santicola wrote a grant proposal for an IBC learning center that was quickly funded. She then went onto secure grants for the IBC vocational center and the physical fitness center, as well as for the boxing and community service components.

In 2008, Cummins and Santicola hatched a plan to send IBC kids into Santicola's hometown of San Pierre to help out with CROPS, an organization founded by Santicola and her late mother to encourage young people in small town rural America to revitalize their communities.

"The idea was, why not have inner city kids working alongside the rural kids to revitalize these rural towns," Santicola explains. "The city kids would be exposed to small town America and perhaps go back to live there someday... and help to stop these towns from dying."

The IBC-CROPS partnership was a success in its inaugural year, when six IBC young people joined a group of San Pierre teen-agers to restore the town's dilapidated Lion's Club building. The result was so impressive that a church congregation leased the space, Sunday services now drawing upwards of 100 worshippers per week in a town of 156 residents.

"The CROPS project is perfect for our Gloves with Love program, where our young athletes give back to the community," says Coach Cummins. "Community service is one of the five main points we stress at the gym."

To further IBC's roll in the CROPS mission, both Cody Houghtalling and Trevone Mathis are now members of the CROPS Board of Directors.

The 2011 summer work included a clean-up of the deteriorating San Pierre Park tennis courts, as well as the landscaping around the welcome signs along the highway running through town. Gardening chores were also performed at Our Lady of Holy Cross parkland which has been designated as the starting point for San Pierre's 40-mile bicycle path.

"The weather was extremely hot the week the kids were in town," Santicola says. "But they worked through it like champions and the townspeople were very impressed."

"We've been lucky that the residents of San Pierre have been so generous," Cummins explains, referring to the lunch hosted by the women's auxiliary of St. Luke's church, as well as the financial donations made by the St. Luke's Bible School and various other townspeople.

"We had two people vying to pay for our breakfast at the Fingerhut," Cummins laughs, referring to a restaurant near Bass Lake where both the owner and a Fingerhut patron offered to pay for the group's breakfast one morning. "The gentleman at the next table ended-up picking up the tab, and the restaurant owner paid for breakfast the next morning instead," Cummins explains.

The IBC group was also featured in the local newspaper as well as with an interview on WKVI radio in the neighboring town of Knox.

“It was the first time I’d ever been on the radio,” says Treyvone. “It was a very cool experience for all of us.”

“The work at San Pierre is actually a lot of fun,” Treyvone continues. “The fact that we make a difference in this town really means a lot to me. It’s also a chance to bond with the other kids from IBC—it makes you realize what you can do with team work.”

Gerard Chambers agrees. “Ever since I was a little kid, I’ve been dressing up as a doctor on Halloween,” he explains. “I’ve always wanted to be a doctor because I want to help people. That’s why I liked going to San Pierre – ‘cause it’s all about helping people.”

“If you do good things, good things will come back,” says Louis Grier. “What I do in San Pierre, I know it’ll come back in my boxing career.”

“Every year with CROPS seems to just get better,” says Cummins. “Our work in San Pierre gives us the chance to reinforce what we teach the kids at the gym: The importance of hard work, lasting connections, courtesy and giving back. Although it’s great to be a champion in the ring, it’s more important to be a champion in life.”

Concludes Treyvone, “San Pierre, Indiana will always be one of my greatest memories.”