

SPORTS

Just Smile: Franklin's Random Smiles Project holds 8th annual Wiffle Ball Tournament

Special to the News/Ryan Martin

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FRANKLIN – Paul Molla likes to give back. And he’s doing so with a plastic ball and bat.

The Franklin resident is the Co-Founder/President of Random Smiles Project, a charity that provides a bridge of support to people going through difficult times. Molla’s work with his organization aims to create a culture of community involvement.

So, insert a Wiffle Ball Tournament that raises money for local projects.

“Wiffle ball was pretty hot at the moment,” said Molla, who started the baseball event eight years ago. “So we said this would be a cool way to get people together and younger people (involved).”

As is tradition, Molla served as commissioner of the annual Random Smiles Project Wiffle Ball Tournament at Fletcher Field on Aug. 13.

The tourney featured 22 teams, a walk-off homer and smiles. Lots of them.

The event also raised roughly \$5K for their charitable efforts.

“We’re very thankful that we can help as many people as we can,” Molla said.

Random Smiles Project comes up with Wiffle Ball Tournament

When Random Smiles Project was founded in 2006, Molla and lifelong friend Matt Sousa didn’t have Wiffle ball in mind – they just wanted to give back to the community.

“It’s grassroots,” Molla said. “It’s community-based and it’s all about paying it forward.”

Molla, a lieutenant in the Franklin Fire Department, and Sousa, a mortgage broker and owner of Bullseye Real Estate Group, found their first way to pay it forward in Franklin.

The two friends caught wind that Davis Thayer Elementary School had nearly 400 students but just one basketball to play with.

Playing for dad: Joe Corsi wears father's old jersey, honors late Red Sox pitcher at Oldtime Baseball Game

As a response, Random Smiles Project provided the school with dozens of basketballs, soccer balls and more.

“You name it, we bought it for ‘em,” Molla said. “We brought the balls out and the kids went bananas! Absolutely crazy!”

Having both grown up in Franklin, Molla and Sousa founded the charity to inspire volunteerism. Over the past 16 years, Random Smiles Project has pulled off initiatives like buying sports equipment for schools, building renovations and handicap ramps, and hosting galas to fund it all.

With the Random Smiles Project completely led by volunteers, though, Molla started to notice a trend among participants a few years back.

“We have a bunch of older people who help us,” he said. “We wanted to bring (Random Smiles Project) to the next generation of kids and young adults.”

Thus, the Wiffle Ball tournament.

The idea came from Carla Stafford, director of events for Random Smiles Project.

“I found a Wiffle Ball Tournament in Easton,” Stafford said. “... and I said ‘What if we do that?’”

‘We had no idea what we were doing’

With Stafford’s suggestion, the Wiffle Ball Tournament began in 2015.

Some early rules for the event included six-inning games, a plastic strikezone behind home plate and no base-running. Hits were decided based on where the ball lands in fair territory.

“We had no idea what we were doing,” Molla said.

The 2015 tournament, which raised money for the family of Franklin's Paul Digrasio, ended up being a huge success with 36 teams involved.

"We said, 'Let's find a reason to do a Wiffle Ball Tournament every year,'" Stafford said.

With donations given to a different family each year, Random Smiles Project hosted tournaments from 2015 to 2019.

The 2020 and 2021 tourneys were canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which made Random Smiles Project unsure of what to expect this summer.

"We were nervous that other people would be nervous: The fans, players," Stafford, a healthcare consultant, said. "But we had to start somewhere."

Despite the doubts, the Wiffle Ball Tournament went off without a hitch last month. Over 90 people competed in the event, which also featured a food stand and raffle. Ironically enough, Stafford's sons and their friends won the championship.

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"My kids have played since tournament one," Stafford said. "We've gone from a family team to them with their friends."

Stafford's oldest son, John (Class of 2020), played with his Wayland High classmates Evan Vassilovski and Gavin Moser, and his younger brother, George (Class of 2025).

Moser, a former pitcher for the Warriors, hit the game-winning home run in the eighth inning to secure the championship trophy made of sawed off plastic bats. The winning team also won \$300.

"It's a great event," Moser said. "It was fun to play with my friends from high school. Taking home that trophy was huge for Wayland athletics."

'It goes a long way'

With the annual tournament back, Random Smiles Project is excited to announce their date for 2023: Aug. 12.

Random Smiles Project will still stay busy with new projects before next year's tournament.

All projects and charity work through the organization are made possible through community fundraising and aren't successful without the help of local volunteers. With support from the community, Random Smiles Project is grateful to those who have helped them along the way.

"People give us \$50 or \$100 and it goes a long way; it's very beneficial to us," Molla said. "... We have been so fortunate over the past almost 16 years."