

The Gryphons' Lair FOOTBALL

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Gryphon's Community Involvement Feature

Gryphon Football players wear many hats. They are athletes, students, and mentors. But one of the common denominators among all of those that come through the program is the role of community ambassador. It's a job that's as important as the one they do on the field, and in many cases, makes a much bigger impact. Any player on the Guelph team understands this responsibility well before they ever wear the red, black, and gold jersey. It's discussed in the recruiting process and community service has become an ingrained component of the program's distinct culture.

Doug Pflug is one of the people responsible for that. Pflug was a U of G player from 1986 to 1989 but he made one of the most important decisions of his life when his playing career was done, taking a job as a Guelph police officer.

"The program helped define and create the core principles that I learned through football, which were characteristics the Guelph Police Service wanted," he says.

Pflug was always intent on giving back to the community that was so good to him. About 20 years ago, then Gryphon head coach Tom Arnott asked Pflug to come to talk to the players about getting involved in volunteering. Each training camp, he would pay a visit to talk with the team, mentoring those who wanted to pursue a career in law enforcement, police, fire, ambulance, or corrections.

And Gryphon Football's commitment to the community went to a new level when Stu Lang joined the program.

"Stu always says, 'We're going to take good, young men and make them better,'" Pflug explains. "Our legacy, once football is done, can be to transcend these young men into really giving back to the communities and making an impact."

The football program and its players are now fixturing throughout Guelph. The team does work with several organizations including Big Brothers Big Sisters and many women's charities, while also raising awareness for critical campaigns like the Think Pink Game, where YWCA Women of Distinction are honoured, or recognizing those doing work in the city with Gryphon Football Community Heroes.

Pflug helped develop the Salute to Service game at the Gryphon Home Opener where those members of the local police, fire, ambulance, and correction branches are hosted in the Gryphon's Nest.

“We want the community to support us in our athletic endeavours, but it can’t be a one-way relationship,” says Pflug, noting that Gryphon Football has produced 25 members, among the players, staff, and coaches, who have embarked on careers in those areas of service.

One of the truly gratifying aspects of Gryphon Football’s commitment to the community is when the players make trips off campus to see the people. Grace Pereira, an employee at the Guelph YMCA, hosted a community event in the summer where second-year defensive back Uriel Kalenga and third-year quarterback Brayden Lassenba came to visit and teach camp kids football skills.

“It’s important for these student-athletes to be involved in events like this as it gets them out, not only as a promotion for the team but also because it allows them to be around a community, they may not be familiar with and interact with children,” says Pereira.

“It reflects upon the values that are important for a team to be successful by creating a space where these boys work together to teach the future generation of football players the knowledge and skillset they have acquired. It was a great opportunity for the children to be able to take part in this event, and they responded. When it was time to leave, the kids were quite upset and mentioned how much fun they had. Even throughout the rest of the summer, I had parents and children remarking how much fun it was and if another event could be scheduled.

“It was a day filled with excitement and joy and it really spoke to the heart of these players, taking time out of their off-season training schedules to help coach and educate the next generation of players.”

Giving back isn’t limited to the boundaries of Guelph, however. Kicker Jared Fernandez-Brown went to Ecuador last May as part of the ME to WE program, helping with the construction of a building at a school in Chimborazo. The experience made a lasting impression on the young Gryphon.

“We don’t realize it, but our community has done so much for us, providing us with better opportunities,” says Fernandez-Brown. “When we give back, it brings everyone closer together. I have always said that everyone in the world is just one big family and we must help each other and those in need.

“That’s why trips like this are a great way to give back to not just your community, but to the world, we live in.”

The strong character among Gryphon players is obvious. Pflug, along with his wife and fellow officer Michelle, also thought that a community service award presented at the annual Gryphon Football Gala would be a great way to recognize those who went above and beyond. This season will mark the fifth year the award is presented with Matt Nesbitt, Orion Edwards (twice), and Nic Mirijello the previous recipients.

Pflug considers community service as medicine for the soul, a gesture that helps both those in need and the individual reaching out.

“I love seeing people who have realized they had some opportunity in their life because of their athletic ability and that they want to pay it back,” he says. “Anyone who will be successful in life has to one day learn that ‘me’ does not supersede ‘we.’”

“We want these guys to look beyond their own personal interests and the team’s interests and say, ‘I want to make my community better.’”
