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Editorial Assistant, Rachel Smith
Writers, Lindsay Allen . Amber D. Browne
Gregg Davis . Betty Tryon . Carolyn Wills
Editors/Proofreaders, Pat Anthony

GRAPHICS AND DESIGN

Creative Director, Chris McCalla
Artists, Kristin Bato . Morgan Christensen
Martha Macias . Brande Morgan
Shannon Pfaff . Anthony Sarmienta

PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography Director, Jill Rose
Photography Coordinator, Amy Ramirez
Photographers, Kenzie Luke
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ON THE COVER



LeAnna Gieger plans to be a part of Miracle League for a long time.

Photo by Amanda Olson.

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Play Ball!

— By Amber D. Browne



Smack! It's the child's first bit of the baseball season. The crowd cheers, "Run!" The child takes off to first base as the opposing team moves to make the play. This is a typical scene from America's favorite pastime, but for those taking the field with the Miracle League of Parker County, the game has taken on a special meaning.

The Miracle League is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) that gives those with disabilities the opportunity to play ball. LeAnna Gieger was instrumental in bringing the Miracle League of Parker County to life. The local league started with a vision by George

and Amy Mercer, business owners and philanthropists in the community. As assistant to the Mercer family, LeAnna was called upon to put their plan in motion.

George and Amy's special-needs adult son, Vincent Mercer, loves baseball and wanted a chance to play. The age cutoff for other leagues geared toward players with disabilities is 18, so Vincent was left unable to pursue his love of the game. In 2014, the Mercer family discussed with Miracle League representatives the possibility of building a stadium off Tin Top Road on land the Mercers owned and donated. The idea snowballed, and LeAnna took the reins of the project. Things moved quickly, and the field was ready for opening day of the fall 2015 season.

"When George had me do this, it was insane for about six months," she said, laughing. The field was built with a surface perfect for wheelchairs and crutches. The stadium includes



bleachers for the crowd, a concession stand and special restrooms outfitted for players with disabilities. The initial budget was \$250,000, but at the end of the building process, the Mercers had spent \$1 million on the stadium. "It's first-class," LeAnna said.

Currently, the field is only used for Miracle League of Parker County Saturday morning games. However, they are excited to watch it grow and be used for many more events in the future. Volunteers coach, buddy up



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with the players on the field and work the concession stand. This allows parents to sit in the stands and enjoy the game. “We have had parents come up and cry, thanking us. One mom said, ‘It’s so awesome to pull up and know this is ours,’” LeAnna shared.

In the inaugural season last fall, the league had two teams that each included about 15 players — the Aggies and the Red Raiders. As the spring season gets underway this month, LeAnna hopes to have at least four teams with 12-15 players on each team. “After experiencing the fall season, I believe the community is going to take it and run with it. We want to keep growing,” LeAnna said. “It couldn’t have been possible without George and Amy’s generosity.”

Registration is open to community members from age 5 to in their 30s. Organizers eventually want the league to include divisions for age groups and level of disability. Each player gets a buddy for the games, which is one of the most important volunteer positions. “They stay with the players and help them throughout the game,” LeAnna explained. They keep the players safe on the field and guide them during the game.

Before the fall season kicked off, Matt Ticzkus with Victory Baptist Academy, contacted LeAnna and offered to help where needed. “He is just a lifesaver,” LeAnna stated. Each Saturday, more than 40 volunteers from the Christian school and church showed up at the field to



James Gray and LeAnna Gieger.



volunteer as buddies, run the concession stand and serve as the mascot. "It is an undertaking to get 40-50 people on Saturday mornings and commit to be there." LeAnna would like to possibly include volunteer days during the spring season to give businesses and other organizations a chance to help during the games. "It's taken on a life of its own," she added. "Everyone is willing to pitch in as needed."

Before assisting with the creation of the Miracle League of Parker County, LeAnna had never been involved with special needs children in this capacity. "It will change your life to see it," she said. "You go the first time, and you'll cry. Then by the end of the game, you're in stitches. It forever changes you."

The players have the time of their lives out on the ballfield. "It gives them a sense of friendship and camaraderie," LeAnna said. Each Saturday morning during the six-week season, they get a chance to catch up with their friends and make memories that last a lifetime. "They are so grateful for anything they get," LeAnna said. "We are such an entitled society, and when you watch them, it's just like Christmas day. You can't not be changed."

The Miracle League of Parker County's future holds many projects. The field could be used to hold fundraisers, baseball tournaments and birthday parties for children with special needs. Additional parking has also been proposed, as well as a playground for children with special needs. The playground would be geared toward motor skills and include equipment specially made for children with disabilities. "It allows them to have the same experience that children who don't have disabilities can experience," LeAnna



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commented. She hopes to raise \$350,000 over the next year to begin construction on the playground.

“Through working for George and Amy, I’ve learned the importance of giving graciously to others and the community. When I first started the Miracle League, it was part of my job. It’s ended up one of my biggest passions,” she admitted. LeAnna said being part of the Miracle League has humbled her. “It made me very grateful to just be able to, in an hour on a Saturday, give joy not only to the children but to the families — to feel like they have a place they belong that is top-notch.”

LeAnna will continue to assist with the Miracle League of Parker County, but James Gray has taken over the position as executive director of the program. James played professional football and graduated from Texas Tech University with a degree in special education. He works with T.G. Mercer Consulting, and the Mercer’s son, Vincent, works directly with him several days a week. “We feel like this is a really good fit for him,” LeAnna said.

“George and Amy’s vision is that it lasts long after they do,” LeAnna shared. The Miracle League of Parker County has joined community members from Weatherford, Aledo and surrounding areas in a pastime everyone can enjoy. The public is invited to attend games. Times are posted on the Miracle League of Parker County’s website. “It’s amazing to watch them have that interaction that we take for granted,” she said. “Everybody loves ball. It’s just about the kids all day long, having fun — giving them the experience. I see myself being involved for a long time to come.” **NOW**

Editor’s Note: Visit www.miracleleagueparkercounty.com for additional information.