

YOUTH
TO WATCH
2020

SPOTLIGHT ON

JOHN
DELUCA

By Heather Motro,
Assistant Managing Editor

Basketball. Hockey. Flag football. Cross country. This list goes on. You name the sport, John DeLuca, 17, has probably played it. More than a student athlete, John takes inspiration from his love for sports to give back to his community and his country.

As an elementary student at Ascension Catholic School, John learned that some of his classmates didn't play sports because their families couldn't afford the fees for teams, lessons or equipment.

"This was really disturbing to me, as I'd played sports my whole life and I don't know what I would do without it," he said. The impression stuck with him until his freshman year at Holy Trinity Episcopal Academy.

That year, John resold several pairs of sneakers and used his own savings to create an Ascension Sports Scholarship fund that enabled students previously unable to play on school teams. After this first success, John began asking for donations around his community.

Too young to set up a Paypal or bank account to hold donations, he asked his mother to set one up for him. With her help, he soon filed for 501(c)(3) status for his new not-for-profit. Aspire! Youth, as he called it, would come to shape the childhoods of more than 5,000 kids—and counting—who aspired to play sports.

Excerpt from John DeLuca's Veterans Day speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars Rocket Post, Nov. 11 2019:

"But what can I do for the heroes who serve and the thousands of veteran heroes who have served before? I am only a kid, right? I can say thank you. Two little words that mean so much. Thank you... It is amazing to see the impact that saying thanks can have on people."

SNAPSHOT

NAME	AGE	SCHOOL	TALENT
John DeLuca	17	Holy Trinity Episcopal Academy	Passion for Sports. Passion for Helping Others in Need, including Veterans and Children.

Funds kept pouring in for Aspire! Youth, as he developed new ways to raise money: he sponsored an annual Superbowl pool, with half of its proceeds designated to the charity. He entered essays contests, such as a Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) contest that won him \$300 for the organization. Recently, he began partnering with local corporations and organizations including Florida Institute of Technology (FIT) Basketball Camp, the Play Like a Champion: A Team for Every Child initiative, the Notre Dame Club of Melbourne and the Dorcas Outreach Center for Kids (the DOCK). Every cent that Aspire! Youth collects helps fund the provision of sports equipment to underfunded school sports programs as well as scholarships for students to play sports.

But his service attitude didn't stop there.

John had always coined himself a "sports-loving patriot," but it wasn't until, as a sophomore, he visited Normandy, France that he felt his patriotism truly bloom. There, at the site of the historic World War II D-Day invasion, he was impressed to learn that most of American soldiers that fought and died for the United States on D-Day were just a few years older than he was. Humbled, John searched for a way to say "thank you" to America's service men and women.

Intrado Corporation came to mind. In honor of Veterans Day, this American technology company asked its employees to write thank-you post cards to veterans and current soldiers.

Then, an organization called Operation Gratitude tucked these postcards inside care packages to send to current military members, veterans, first responders, their families and their caretakers.

When John returned home from France, he and his family set up a table outside his church equipped with a stack of postcards and asked members of the congregation to write words of thanks in them. He also called on the students and faculty at his school to write postcards. And, of course, he wrote his own thank-you postcards, too. By the end of the drive, John had collected around 1,000 postcards from his church, grade school and Aspire Youth! communities. What's more, Intrado Corporation donated one dollar to Operation Gratitude for each postcard he collected, so \$1,000 went to filling the care packages with goods such as snacks, entertainment and hygiene products.

Junior year of high school is a busy one for any student, let alone a student running both a not-for-profit and a charity campaign virtually on his own.

John, however, was undaunted by his packed academic schedule. Amid standardized tests, Advanced Placement (AP) classes, varsity golf and soccer seasons and an initial dive into college prospects, he added an ambitious expansion of both Aspire! Youth and the postcard campaign. With the aid of the website Donors Choose, John extended Aspire! Youth beyond Melbourne to Tampa and Boynton Beach, where he sent donations to an underfunded children's sports teams.

He also developed a closer partnership with the DOCK, a safe gathering and recreational center for at-risk children in low-income families, in Melbourne.

On Veterans Day, John once again called on his school and church to help write thank-you postcards for Operation Gratitude. Then, John realized he had another growing team of supporters behind him—or rather, many teams, individuals and entire schools that he had helped through Aspire! Youth. He turned to these connections and asked them to write on postcards he provided. Meanwhile, Intrado Corporation raised the stakes to two dollars donated per postcard. The result: a staggering 6,000 postcards and \$12,000 donated.

Although John had planned for Aspire! Youth to send a group of children to the Florida Tech summer basketball camp, FIT canceled its summer camps to flatten the COVID-19 curve. However, thanks to his partnership with the DOCK, John rerouted the plans, now planning instead to send 15 kids to the DOCK's summer camp. In addition to the sports funds, John also sent donations to the DOCK

for necessities, like food, for families who lost their source of income during the shutdown. "I'm also providing equipment, and I'm always asking for donations and just trying to help kids as much as possible," John said. These donations, John reflects, "Don't always pan out... But some do, and that keeps me going."

At first glance, John is a kid who lives and breathes sports—he loves to play and coach sports, watch sports, and play sports video games with his friends. He's also a hardworking high schooler with six AP classes on his plate for his upcoming senior year and a goal to attend to a top college with a strong sense of community (and plenty of intramural sports programs, of course).

But when John's not on the field or in the classroom, he devotes all of his time to giving back to his community and country. "I have put hundreds of hours into Aspire! Youth, both the sports aspect of it and the military thank you campaign," John said. "I'm going to continue collecting postcards always... and I'd like to continue Aspire! Youth wherever I go."

Yeah, this kid's alright. •

submit your youth nominee:

THIS KID'S ALRIGHT will be a regular feature about under 25 youth in Brevard County who impress us with their foresight, problem solving skills, business acumen and other leadership skills. If you know of someone we should consider, please email shawna@spacecoastmagazines.com with a brief description of the candidate, age, and why you think they should be considered. Candidates will be considered on a case-by-case basis and presented as space allows.