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Kids Inc. football players run across Redskin Field Friday night at halftime. Tuesday, girls volleyball players will be recognized in The Big House. Local children from the third through sixth grades can participate in Kids Inc. activities for no charge. The program operates with a volunteer board and volunteer coaches and receives funding from the United Way and other private donors to purchase uniforms and equipment as well as provide officiating at games. L&T photo/Earl Watt

Group matters 'because sports matter'

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

It's an overcast Sunday afternoon in mid-September, the perfect time for a nap. But nobody's sleeping at the north Blue Bonnet Park field area, where players line up to vie for touchdowns, tackles and, every boy hopes, the win.

Across 10th Street, at Cottonwood Intermediate School, the gymnasium resounds with the smack of volleyballs served and returned. Not to be outdone by the boys, girls are hard at work in back-to-back volleyball matches.

Kids Inc., the nonprofit agency focused on serving kids from age 8 to 13, is on the field and in the gym. The goal? Provide children with a structured way to learn to play organized sports, before they reach the age where school-sponsored athletics take over. In the process, said Kids Inc. President Rod Hay, boys and girls get the exercise they need, build friendships and make the entire community a better place.

"Kids Inc. matters because sports matters," Hay said. "There are all kinds of reasons for saying that. Sports help children develop social skills. Even the shy kids benefit, because the activity kind of forces them to get out there and be part of a team, and that helps them learn to connect with other kids in the community."

Research has shown that children involved in sports and extracurricular activities make better grades, too.

"That's a big selling point," Hay said. "There's something about getting out there and working hard that carries over to the classroom and the homework."

But on this particular weekend, it's what the children who have put on bright-colored jerseys over the program-supplied pads and helmets are not doing that pleases Hay.

"Kids need to get off the video games and get outside," he said. "They need to be outdoors, running around. Too many kids are watching too much TV, and that's not good for them."

When Kids Inc. started more than 50 years ago as a volunteer-led effort, the organization was all about football. Newspaper articles from 1962 and 1963 listed each player by name, commented on the coaches' strategies and urged local businesses to get behind the group. Over time, Kids Inc. branched out to include more age groups, different sports — and girls.

Hay says girls' sports, in place for decades before he came long, hold a special place in his heart.

"I have three daughters, and I coached them all," he said. "It's something I can do to be involved in their lives." With his oldest daughter, Riley, a freshman at K-State, Hay is still involved in Kids Inc. as a parent.

"I'm coaching my fifth-grade daughter in volleyball right now," he said.

The need for girls' team coaches tends to be greater, Hay said, whether the sport is volleyball, basketball or soccer.

"We struggle getting coaches and volunteers for the girls' teams, especially in soccer," Hay said. "Everybody's busy, that's the biggest reason, but when it comes to the girls' teams, some of the men don't want to coach the girls because they aren't sure how to do it. The biggest comment I hear is guys saying, 'Last time I tried to coach girls, I made them all cry.'"

In spite of that possibility, Hay said, he likes coaching girls.

"It's actually easier than coaching boys," he said. "Boys try to outdo one another; they're more competitive. They talk back to the coaches more. Girls listen."

As a nonprofit organization, Kids Inc. operates with a volunteer board, currently short a few members. Hay said he's hoping for fresh faces in the near future.

“We have board meetings once a month, though we don't meet in June and July,” he said. “As a board member, you don't have to be great at sports, and you aren't necessarily expected to coach or run a league. When you're starting, you really just help out with sign-ups, football equipment check-out, maybe run the scoreboard at a game.”

In addition to board members, Kids Inc. also needs coaches as each sport comes into season. Right now, boys' football and girls' volleyball are underway. Other sports include boys' and girls' basketball and boys' and girls' soccer.

“We always need coaches,” Hay said. “What I tell people is, you practice two times a week, one hour each, and you have Sunday games. It's all time you're spending with your kids. You don't have to be an expert, you just have to have the willingness to spend that time.”

Kids Inc. receives funding through the Seward County United Way, the City of Liberal, and private contributions. The organization allows all children in Liberal to play for free, with returnable uniforms provided free of charge.

For information about how to volunteer, apply for a board spot, or coach a team, contact Hay at 624-8471 or via email at hayr@hdvest.net.

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