

## Manhattan Beach News

### Baseball leads to special-needs community

by Julie Sharp

(Updated: Thursday, July 16, 2009 9:49 AM PDT)

When Manhattan Beach resident Rose van Wier Hein started the Little League Challenger baseball teams in the city, her desire was to go beyond the cheers, hot dogs, strikeouts and homeruns. She wanted to start a community for special-needs children.

Van Wier Hein got the ball rolling with the Challenger League three years ago, along with help from her husband and now college-age son. She realized that children with special needs, like her younger son, need a network of support around them not only while they are students living at home, but also for the future.

"What scares parents (of special-needs children) the most is what is going to happen to them when they leave school, or when the parents are gone. Statistically, about 73 percent never leave home, because they have nowhere to go," said van Wier Hein.

She said there is a lifetime of needs ahead that will have to be met, so she is taking some first steps to build a special-needs community with baseball.

The Challenger League comprises just two coed teams, with an age range of 5 to 18, is coach-pitched and each player is paired with a volunteer mentor. "It's the most beautiful ball game you've ever seen in your life," said van Wier Hein. "The kids will stop and wave to their parents as they run to first base. We have kids that go around the bases in wheelchairs and walkers."

She said her family loves baseball, so that was why they chose the sport to build a community of parents. "I want to build what I saw in Holland here," said van Wier Hein. She said years ago, when she was in the Netherlands, she saw a community of special-needs adults living together in a ranch-style setting, working in the outdoors.

A news article appeared in the Washington Post recently, which echoed her concerns. The news article stated that by year 2023, more than 380,000 autistic people will need extensive adult services. "The bill for the tide of autistic children entering adulthood over the next 15 years (will be) an estimated \$27 billion annually in current, noninflation-adjusted dollars by the end of that period," the article claimed. It mirrors van Wier Hein's concern that much attention is spent on the quest to uncover what causes autism and the education of autistic children, but



Rose van Wier Hein outside City Council chambers July 7 holding her recognition award for her contributions to the Challenger baseball league. Van Wier Hein is joined by her husband and nephew along with parents of special-needs children involved in Challenger League and Golden Heart Ranch. (photo courtesy of Rose van Wier Hein)

not much is in place to meet the challenges of adults with autism.

Another recent news article from the Sacramento Bee also forewarns of society's lack of preparedness for autistic adults. It quotes the director of the UC Davis M.I.N.D. Institute as saying that the research and programs are not in place to deal with autistic adults.

"The first wave of autistic and special-needs kids reaching adulthood has just hit. There is nowhere for these kids to go," said van Wier Hein. "The state facility waiting lists are long."

Before the baseball season starts up again in the spring, van Wier Hein is organizing a fund-raiser, probably not the last one, for Golden Heart Ranch, her nonprofit organization. The organization is raising funds to build a ranch home in California for young adults with developmental disabilities.


"These special kids are so beautiful and funny. They're different, but they are amazing children," said van Wier Hein. "They are also like the rest of us. They want to feel a sense of ownership and accomplishment. They deserve it."

She said the goal is to acquire a 40-acre ranch, maybe in the Ventura area, by 2012 or 2013. She said it will house up to 50 special-needs young adults, along with caregivers, and will provide jobs for those who live there.

To view more information about the September fund-raiser or Golden Heart Ranch, visit [www.goldenheartranch.org](http://www.goldenheartranch.org)

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