

Everyday

for People With Disabilities

By Pamela A. Keene

When Abigail Kidd was born in 2000, doctors predicted her life would be short. She and her parents, Lesa and Tommy Lee Kidd of Lawrenceburg, were determined to prove them wrong.

“Abigail was born with almost too many physical challenges to count, including major heart issues, intestinal issues and Down syndrome, requiring multiple lengthy hospitalizations and surgeries,” says Tommy Lee, Lawrence County Circuit Court clerk.

“Today, at 23, God has used Abigail’s life as the inspiration of many of the people in Lawrence County and surrounding areas who have helped bring Abigail’s Plan to life. And Abigail’s Plan, the name of our Miracle League baseball

program for people with disabilities, has been the catalyst to completely transform our community.”

A national initiative that began in 2000, Miracle League baseball was created to remove barriers for people with disabilities to enjoy America’s favorite pastime. They play on adaptive rubberized fields with special rules. Everyone gets a turn at bat, there are no outs and everyone gets to score a run in the two-inning games. Community volunteers serve as buddies to help players round the bases.

When she was 6, Abigail played in a county softball league with her cousin.

“As the season progressed, Lesa and I realized Abigail’s limitations compared to the other players on the team,” Tommy Lee says. “We wanted to find something

she could participate in and enjoy. Because she loved playing ball, Lesa and I wanted to start a program specifically for people with special needs.”

The league started in 2008 with 11 players and grew to 59 players over six years that followed. They played “Buddy Ball” at the community ballpark while other games were being played, accommodating people using wheelchairs, leg braces, crutches and walkers.

“People would regularly stand between the fields where their own child was playing so they could watch our game as well,” Tommy Lee says.

“Before long, the commitment and passion to help people with special needs spread throughout the entire county. In 2014, with lots of prayers, we were able to launch the initiative named Abigail’s Plan



People with disabilities can play America’s favorite pastime with the help of community volunteer buddies, who help with batting and rounding the bases. PHOTOS COURTESY OF ABIGAIL’S PLAN

Miracles



ADOBE STOCK IMAGES BY HANDIES PEAK



Gallatin Parks and Recreation opened its Miracle League Park.

For years, parks and recreation employee and now director David Brown dreamed of creating an accessible recreational facility.

“A young man who had gotten hurt in a Sunday afternoon game of football approached me about creating recreational opportunities for people with disabilities,” he says. “Ideas were discussed over the years, but it wasn’t until we heard about a grant that the wheels began to turn.”

In 2018, city officials applied for a matching grant from the state to build accessible recreational facilities. Plans were drawn up, and the idea of an inclusive ballfield expanded to include an accessible playground and pedal park as well.

The city was awarded a \$500,000 grant from the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation in 2018. With the city’s match, the town could build Miracle Park, with a rubberized field, bleachers, lights, dugouts, and ADA-compliant concessions and restrooms.

The Abigail’s Plan field in Lawrenceburg is specially adapted for players with mobility issues.

with a goal of raising money to build a rubberized Miracle League baseball field.”

Starting with no money, donations from the community started pouring in. Within 73 weeks, more than \$350,000 had been deposited in a bank account. To date, Abigail’s Plan has raised a little more than \$600,000 and sold more than 17,000 Abigail’s Plan shirts.

In May 2017, the first game on the new Abigail’s Miracle Field was played. Two years later, organizers held a note-burning ceremony when the loan was paid in full, in part because of labor donations by construction contractors.

“Everything we do will continue to support projects throughout our community and region,” Tommy Lee says. “In the beginning, the goal of Abigail’s Plan was to not only build a rubberized baseball field but also to construct a series of disability-accessible playgrounds in Lawrence County.”

Abigail’s Plan continues to raise funds through events, such as the annual Abigail’s Plan Bulls and Barrels, which has become an International Professional Rodeo Association-sanctioned bull and bronc riding and barrel-racing event drawing cowboys from across the nation.

This year’s event is Saturday, August 26, at Rotary Park in Lawrenceburg. In addition to rodeo competitions, the family event features a concert, food vendors, pony rides and Goobie, a rodeo clown.

For more information, follow Abigail’s Plan on Facebook or visit abigailspan.org.

A 20-year Dream Becomes Reality

It took nearly 20 years and a matching grant from the state of Tennessee, but two years ago,



Young Taye Ramer was the inspiration for building an adaptive field in Columbia. PHOTO COURTESY OF MIRACLE LEAGUE OF COLUMBIA

“We opened the park—in fact, a completely accessible complex with a playground, pedal park and ballfield—in 2021,” says Tatum Pryor, recreation program director for Gallatin. “In that first season, we had 20 players, and it has continued to grow since then.”

Now in its third year of playing at Miracle Park, the Gallatin Miracle League offers a spring and fall series, reaching across the community and region. This spring, 34 players on two teams headed to the ballpark.

“Players and their parents, members of the community, volunteers from high schools, church groups and businesses come out for the games, to be buddies for our players or just to lend their cheers and support,” Tatum says. “The joy that’s evident on the players’ faces and the thrill of their being able to play a sport is beyond description. It has really brought our community together even more.”

Through additional donations from businesses and individuals, participants play free of charge and are provided with uniforms, equipment and trophies. They range from ages 4 to the mid-30s, but play is open to anyone with a disability.

“This is probably the best project that the city and parks have ever done,” Tatum says. “We’ve reached nearly every citizen of every level of ability. And it’s been a great success, bringing people to Gallatin from miles away. Plus, now people with disabilities are able to participate in recreation that never would have been possible before.”

For more information about Miracle League of Gallatin, visit gallatintn.gov/1964/Miracle-League-of-Gallatin.

Connecting for People With Special Needs

In 2011, shortly after Andrew and Becky Ramer brought home their adopted son, Taye, from Ethiopia, they learned he had a rare brain disorder. Four years ago, when he was 8, he started playing baseball with Miracle League in Murfreesboro.

“Our family would drive an hour each way to see Taye play, and it really helped him feel like he was part of something special,” says Robin Estep, Taye’s aunt. “The more we learned about Miracle League, the more we realized that we needed a Miracle League in Columbia, not just for Taye, but for all the other children with special needs in Maury County. That’s when Seth and I decided to connect with a couple of my former high school friends.”

Those friends, and Columbia natives, included Mike Ugglia, whose brother Daniel had played Major League Baseball for the Atlanta Braves and the Miami Marlins. Both brothers were all in.

By early 2021, they had a plan to begin fundraising for The Miracle League of Columbia. The county donated the vacant Babe Ruth Field—where for 40 years area youth played baseball. That included Daniel, who learned the game there.

“Gifting us the land was amazing and gave us the head start that we needed,” Robin says. “And ever since then, we’ve been actively raising money to build a Miracle Field, planning to break ground in late summer or early fall.”

As the word spread, several other Columbia natives stepped forward, including Grammy Award-winning country music singer/songwriter Rory

Feek and Runaway June’s Natalie Stovall. Both well-known artists have helped with the success of the fundraising, performing at a Miracle Walk, Songwriters Night and a holiday benefit concert in 2022.

“We have been so blessed by the amount of support we have received from Rory Feek, Natalie Stovall, Runaway June and others,” Robin says. “We are grateful for their continued support in helping us raise awareness.”

So far, the organization has raised more than \$1 million. The goal is to finish the adaptive field by the 2024 spring season.

For information about The Miracle League of Columbia, visit columbiamiracleleague.com.

A Parent’s Commitment Brings Together a Community

When her 10-year-old son, William, wanted to play baseball like his 9-year-old brother, Telan, Cleveland’s Carolyn Kimsey didn’t hesitate to find a league for her oldest son, who was born with Down syndrome.

“I had heard about Miracle League, but the closest program was in Chattanooga, about an hour’s drive away,” she says. “With my job at a gas station, my studies to earn my degree in social work as a nontraditional student at age 50, raising my family and my volunteer work, we decided to just start a program in Bradley County for people with disabilities.”

Carolyn reached out to County Commissioner Mike Hughes and presented her idea, which was quickly embraced by the community. Although funding wasn’t immediately available to build a rubberized field, the county



allowed the league to play at Blue Springs Ball Field, an ADA-accessible facility.

The first season of Miracle League of Bradley County had 63 players and six teams. The field was adapted to have flat bases, wheelchair access and ramps into the dugouts. The first game was played September 17, 2022. The program added accessible bowling and continues to raise money to build its own Miracle League multisport complex.

“Our purpose is to raise awareness and funds to provide education for the community and surrounding area so that people with disabilities will have the same opportunities as others,” Carolyn says. “So far, we’ve raised more than \$12,000 from businesses, individual donations and fundraising events.”

Other community members stepped up, including engineers, land graders and others willing to donate their services.

“Thanks to all the support, we feel blessed that by the 2024 fall season, we will be playing on our own field,” she says.

Carolyn’s family, including her husband, Thomas, and her 17-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, have been supportive on the home front with her many commitments. Thomas coaches a team. Elizabeth also coaches a team and helps bring in buddies for the players.

“So many people in our area have special needs,” Carolyn says. “While we have excellent programs to provide services, the vision for Miracle League brings another opportunity for them to become part of the community. It’s really created a sense of family for all of us.”

Even though the field won’t officially

open until next year, community members know about Miracle League.

“Our families with children with special needs have already discovered what a difference inclusive recreation can make, not only in their own lives but in the way the community has reached out to accept and encourage them,” Carolyn says.

She smiles as she tells a story about a conversation she overheard at a recent game.

“A young boy volunteering as a buddy ran up to his father after a game,” she says. “He was smiling really big with tears in his eyes and said, ‘Dad, they’re just like us. They just want to play baseball,’” Carolyn says. “I knew



ABOVE: Miracle League of Gallatin’s Alan Conley has played with the program since the first season in 2021.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MIRACLE LEAGUE OF GALLATIN



LEFT: At last summer’s Songwriters’ Night fundraising event, 2022 All-Star representative Porter Ford received a special T-shirt from former MLB player Daniel Uggla, while Board Chairman Juli Beck and Board CEO Mike Uggla leant support onstage.

PHOTO COURTESY MIRACLE LEAGUE OF COLUMBIA

then that we were headed in the right direction and that Miracle League would go the distance.”

For more information about Miracle League of Bradley County, visit miracleleaguebc.org. ■



The Bradley County organization has added accessible bowling to their program. PHOTO COURTESY OF MIRACLE LEAGUE OF BRADLEY COUNTY

