

Kim Johnson shares Zach's devotion to kids

Written by Tom Fruehling
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If indeed where your treasure is, there your heart will be also, there's little doubt what's closest to the hearts of Kim and Zach Johnson.

Their own two little boys, naturally, and the daughter who's due Nov. 1. But also the dozens of kids holding bright balloons who followed Zach down the first fairway Monday morning in a ceremonial parade to mark the start of the second annual Zach Johnson Foundation Classic at Elmcrest Country Club.

The youngsters garbed in green T-shirts were second graders from Van Buren and Harrison grade schools in Cedar Rapids who are part of the "Kids on Course" program founded and funded by the Cedar Rapids-bred pro golfer and his Florida-native wife.

"Since very early in Zach's career, we've been committed to kids," said Kim, six months pregnant and sitting in the cool of the clubhouse overlooking the course.

First came "Birdies That Care" seven years ago. Each year since, a local agency affiliated with youth has received funds from Johnson and his main sponsor Transamerica based on the golfer's below-par holes on the PGA Tour.

Recipients of close to \$700,000 so far have been the Community Health Free Clinic, Tanager Place, Boys and Girls Club, Waypoint and the Children of Promise program for youngsters with a parent in prison.

"Cedar Rapids was the obvious place to start," said Kim, 35. "It's where Zach grew up and where he always felt so blessed by the people here and the privileges he had.

"He wants to help other young people have what he had. The same opportunities and a way to get there. It's a way of giving back."

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And it's a mission shared by both, who were married nine years ago after meeting through a friend in the apartment complex where she lived in Orlando, Fla.

A graduate of Stetson University in DeLand, Fla., Kim majored in sociology with an emphasis on criminology. Before marriage, she worked four years in a crime and safety development program in the inner city of Orlando.

"Our focus was to improve conditions in a low income part of the downtown where so many were being displaced from rundown neighborhoods," she said. "So helping children is very much part of my background."

"Kids on Course," a three-year program started last year at the two elementary schools in Cedar Rapids, is an extension of what the couple had been doing before on a smaller scale.

The golf tournament at Elmcrest last year was the kick-off event for the foundation they formed and raised \$500,000, and they donated a matching amount.

"The idea," said Kim, "was to fund a start-up community-based grass roots program that got at the real needs of kids and not just be a bandage. We want to fill in the gaps that aren't being met."

With an annual budget of \$350,000, longtime Cedar Rapids educator Ruth White was brought out of retirement for the third time to develop the pilot project.

Through a year-long variety of enrichment activities and after-school programs, White said students are exposed to opportunities they otherwise would not have. And a key element, she noted, is to establish strong family involvement.

"What we're doing," White said, "is casting out seeds and hoping they might take root. Zach and Kim have given us the wherewithal to make it happen."

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"It just amazes me that they choose to share their good fortune with those that aren't as fortunate."

For her part, Kim said she and her husband feel firmly that it is their responsibility to use their hands to do God's work.

When not on the road 29 weeks a year, they enjoy a good life at their home on Amelia Island, Ga.

Sons Wyatt, who turned 2 last week, and Will ("it's very important to say he's 5 1/2 and not just 5") are healthy and happy. A daughter already named Abby Jane (perhaps A.J., for short) will complete the family, according to Kim.

"We've been blessed," she said. "But we both strongly believe that what we've been given is not ours to keep."

"To whom much is given, much is expected. We really believe that. And we feel very blessed to be able to share what we have."