

Spokesman Review

November 4, 2009 in Sports

<http://www.spokesman.com/stories/2009/nov/04/dream-weaver-for-kids/>

Bresson's vision, hard work revives youth cross country

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Spokane Public Schools elementary youngsters began running against each other again because a marathon runner went the extra mile.

The district in 2003-04 quit providing transportation for five elementary sports – cross country, basketball, volleyball, softball and track and field – for fiscal reasons, said District 81 information services director Terren Roloff, allowing for intramurals instead.

Mike Bresson formed the nonprofit Active4Youth in 2005 as a means to provide after-school sports programs for kids. It led this fall to reinstatement of the district-wide elementary cross country program.

The program encompassed 34 elementary schools and nearly 20 percent of all students, a total of 3,000 in all. The schools were divided among five zones. There were two zone races with top placers, some 500 boys and girls in all, qualifying for the all-city race in late October.

“I don't have kids, although there's one on the way, and I didn't grow up in Spokane,” Bresson said. “The biggest impetus was for kids who really need it. Juvenile delinquency and childhood obesity are important issues to address. They needed something productive and constructive.”

A soccer player at California Lutheran University, Bresson, 38, took up running at the behest of a friend and became more competitive after he arrived here in 1997 to attend law school at Gonzaga University.

Lilac Bloomsday Association director and Olympic marathoner Don Kardong said Bresson is one of the top competitors locally in his age group. He has run in the 38-minute range for 10 kilometers during Bloomsday and has an impressive 2-hour, 22-minute marathon on his resume.

“My goal has always been to qualify for the Olympic Trials, but that qualifying time is 2:19 now, which could be a tall order for me,” Bresson said.

Bresson has a small private law practice in Spokane. Through running and his work with a company that sells fitness and health curriculum to schools, he saw the need and conceived Active4Youth.

He sought out venture capital, but sponsors told him they wanted to see the program first before committing the money. For a variety of reasons, including his chairmanship of the local Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure event, it took Bresson four years to secure funding necessary to revive the popular elementary cross country.

"I started looking for grants and applied for a bazillion," he said.

The Inland Northwest Community Foundation and the Charlotte Martin Foundation helped him raise \$40,000 to offset costs of the elementary program.

He contacted the Lilac Bloomsday Association, which agreed to become the title sponsor of the All-City Cross Country meet. The Association has for 20 years sponsored Fit for Bloomsday for youngsters in the spring, Kardong said.

"Certainly, coaches had come to us and said, 'Gosh, we'd like to see ' around in terms of what, if anything, we could do and then Mike put everything together."

Peter Ellis, director of health and fitness for Spokane Public Schools, called this year's program a great event.

"With Mike coming in and sponsoring the major funding, it was a real energizing thing for the district," he said. "The kids and their families were having a ball. You could see how engaged they were in it. I think it went really, really well."

Bresson said he knows not every youngster will become a competitive distance runner, but he claims all sports have a running foundation.

"This teaches how to be fit and is a lifetime activity, so everyone is gaining," Bresson said. "We're hitting a lot of cylinders for lots of kids."

If he can develop a successful donation campaign, Bresson said he'd like to expand his organization to encompass other sports.

"You never know, but just think," Ellis said. "Now that the door is opened, we might be able to increase the number of sports for kids."

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