

Tyler Steffey 'Field of Dreams' comes home

By Sean Dalton

Staff Writer

As promised, the Tyler Steffey Ball Field has been completed in time for Little League season and spring.

The field, better known in some circles as the Tyler Steffey "Field of Dreams," has become a fine legacy for the young man who it is named after, and whose untimely demise truly inspired a community and group of supporters to push the project to completion.

Tyler was in a crash on Dec. 11, 2007 that took his life and injured two of his classmates. The pain is still visible on his family's faces and in their voices, but they have worked hard with a number of supporters, volunteers and Peace Lutheran Church to create a place of joy and happiness out of a sad tragedy.

The field behind the church, on Jackson Road between Parker and Baker, has been in the works for a number of years with Scio Township approving the land-use over two years ago.

"The reality of it is that if Mike had not been part of the Dexter Little League and our board years ago when we first started talking about this, if Mike had not planted the thought with us to work on this dream that was in place before the accident that took Tyler away from us, we would not have thought about this," said Pastor Larry Courson.

Courson, Tyler's father Michael Steffey and dozens of friends, family and supporters were out at the edge of the church's parking lot right next to the hill that leads up to the backstop and the bright orange sign that reads "Tyler Steffey Field" in bold, black lettering.

The field is still a work in progress. The backstop and side fencing were put in over the past couple of months. The diamond, bases and other essentials were in place. Supporters still have some work to do, such as installing player benches and building a small storage shed, but the important stuff was all there for a very special Saturday.

Michael stood proudly in a Detroit Tiger's jersey signed by Brandon Inge, who signed autographs at Dexter's Pub in one of many successful fund-raisers that helped push the field forward.

"He entertained the kids and spent all kinds of time, and he helped to bring a hurt community together for that night," Michael said, his voice breaking at times during his emotional address to the crowd gathered under clouds that threatened rain, but ultimately spared everyone the trouble.

"It would take me an hour to thank all of the individuals who made contributions to making this field a reality," he said before singling out a few of the key volunteers and organizers (see Steffey's full speech for more).

Those who wish to get involved in finishing Tyler's field or are just looking for more information can call 734-424-0899 and reference "Tyler Steffey Ball Field" or visit www.peaceaa.net.

Following are the touching speeches given by Michael Steffey and Pastor Larry Courson on May 9 at 4 p.m. behind Peace Lutheran Church.

Michael Steffey

Thank you for coming.

When we envisioned building a baseball field on this property several years ago we thought it would look something like this and you'll all get a chance to see it. It has three bases, a home plate, a backstop, but once you get up there to take a look at it you're going to see how incredibly gorgeous this field is.

It really shines because it was built by the love of so many. You have all built a lasting memorial that is just so much more than any epitaph. This is just alive and breathes. It will tell tales for years to come, tales of home runs and no-hitters, popsicles and pop-ups, hot dogs and hot smashes.

There's actually no way that I can express the level of humble and overwhelming gratitude that Deanna, Gina, and I have for the support of the community that isn't just the Dexter community. The community from Ann Arbor to Kalamazoo, from St. Louis to England, from Salt Lake City to northern Illinois. It would take me an hour to thank all of the individuals who made contributions to making this field a reality.

However, I think I would be totally remiss if I didn't point out and recognize some certain individuals who really carried the torch for this field of dreams. And I believe that they epitomize the great command to love your neighbor as yourself. Deedee and Shelby Polidori were the captains of organizing the fund-raising. I didn't know either of them before that dark day in December. No stone would have been turned, no grass seeds sprouted, no fence poles set without raising the funds that we did and without their tireless leadership, we're all indebted to them.

Ray Essell. Ray led the organizing, the contracting and the constructing on this hallowed piece of ground. I know this project was dear to his heart. Again, my thanks are completely insufficient.

And to this guy, No. 15, Brandon Inge of the Detroit Tigers who graciously signed autographs for four hours at Peter's Dexter's Pub after a day that he had caught a full game. He entertained the kids and spent all kinds of time, and he helped to bring a hurt community together for that night. And he wore this bracelet during the start of the 2008 season in solidarity with his new hometown and I know that you should all have Brandon as your favorite Tiger from now on.

And Pastor Larry who has pulled us through this despair and used all of his divine connections to make this a reality. I owe him my eternal thanks.

I know we'll all be sitting together someday at that great game in heaven and we'll be watching The Bird pitch to Clemente, Cash, and Cochrane. We'll listen to George Kell call the game. There's so many others that I would like to thank, but I'll have to do it in person so we can get on with the festivities today.

I've always felt that something special happened when I stepped onto a baseball field. I spent my life playing, coaching, even umpiring just because I felt a spiritual connection to this game and this season, almost like this game is a doorway to heaven. I see that connection in so many kids and coaches that have the privilege to share the field. I think this field will surely culture that love for the greatest game for generations to come.

So God bless you all, let's play some ball.

Larry Courson

Well Mike just expressed his thanks, but the reality of it is that if Mike had not been part of the Dexter Little League and our board years ago when we first started talking about this, if Mike had not planted the thought with us to work on this dream that was in place before the accident that took Tyler away from us, and we would not have thought about this, so let's give a thanks to Mike.

A lot of people had a really important part in making this project a reality. We don't have the time to thank everybody by name, but I would like to express my thanks for everybody who worked on this field and who played a part in this. The simple fact that everybody pulled together with this unbelievable goal of making this field a reality before Tyler's class graduated. To everyone who had a part in that we say thanks.

I believe that we have a little girl with a wheelbarrow who needs to start heading this way. There's a little girl with a wheelbarrow who was actually on this field a long time ago when we were first picking rocks and working on things to try to make this field a possibility. It's only appropriate that she's pushing a rock in this wheelbarrow. Bring it to me.

Thanks Claire.

Inside this wheelbarrow and this bag is a rock and this rock is a thank you to the man who took this field on as his own private project. To Ray Essell who put in more time and more energy than any of you can possibly imagine to make this field happen. So Ray, c'mon up.

(Essell comes up and accepts the rock with a dedication chiseled onto its face)

I also want to thank the Dexter Little League. This is a partnership and this field would not have been a reality without the partnership that we've had. And we entered into a commitment with the Little League to work on this, to build this. If you look at the field it's incredible. As a kid I would have killed to play on a field like this. And this is a start, because as you can see we're going to fence the equipment dugouts and put a screen around them so this will become a competition field. Not only will it be a field where the Little League can play, but it will be a field for tournaments.

I'm glad that the fence isn't out there right now, because if you look out into center field you can see that cornfield out there and I think that one day when the cornfield grows up Shoeless Joe will be walking out onto this ball field to play a game.

Thanks to all of you for coming today. I know all of you in your own way have had a part in this and we really appreciate that ... that this field of dreams has become a reality.

With that said let's dedicate this field.

The Terrence Mann character, in Field of Dreams, said the one constant through all the years has been baseball. America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It has been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt and erased again. But baseball has marked the time. This field, this game, is part of our past. It reminds us of all that was good and all that could be again.

So we are here today to dedicate this field of dreams. This field has become a reality because so many of you had a dream of making something good happen out of something tragic.

It is our hope and dream today that this field will be something good for all of the youth and their families and coaches.

It is our hope and dream that it will not only be a place where games are played, but where players learn to be good teammates and good sports, and ultimately good citizens.

We looked in the Bible and couldn't find any passage on baseball, probably because the game wasn't invented yet.

But the Bible does say a lot about athletes in training. (Timothy 4:8,12) "For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.

We prepare to dedicate this to spring. For God we thank you for all of the people who have worked in so many different ways to make this field of dreams become a reality. We ask you to bless and protect all who play on this field. To guide and direct all who coach on this field. May you use this field for the good of all who come here to watch, to coach, to play.

May good sportsmanship and teamwork be practiced regularly on this field. We pray for your blessing in the name of Jesus, your son – our lord and savior.

Amen.

And now we dedicate Tyler Steffey Field to the glory and honor of God the father, God the son and God the holy spirit.

Amen.