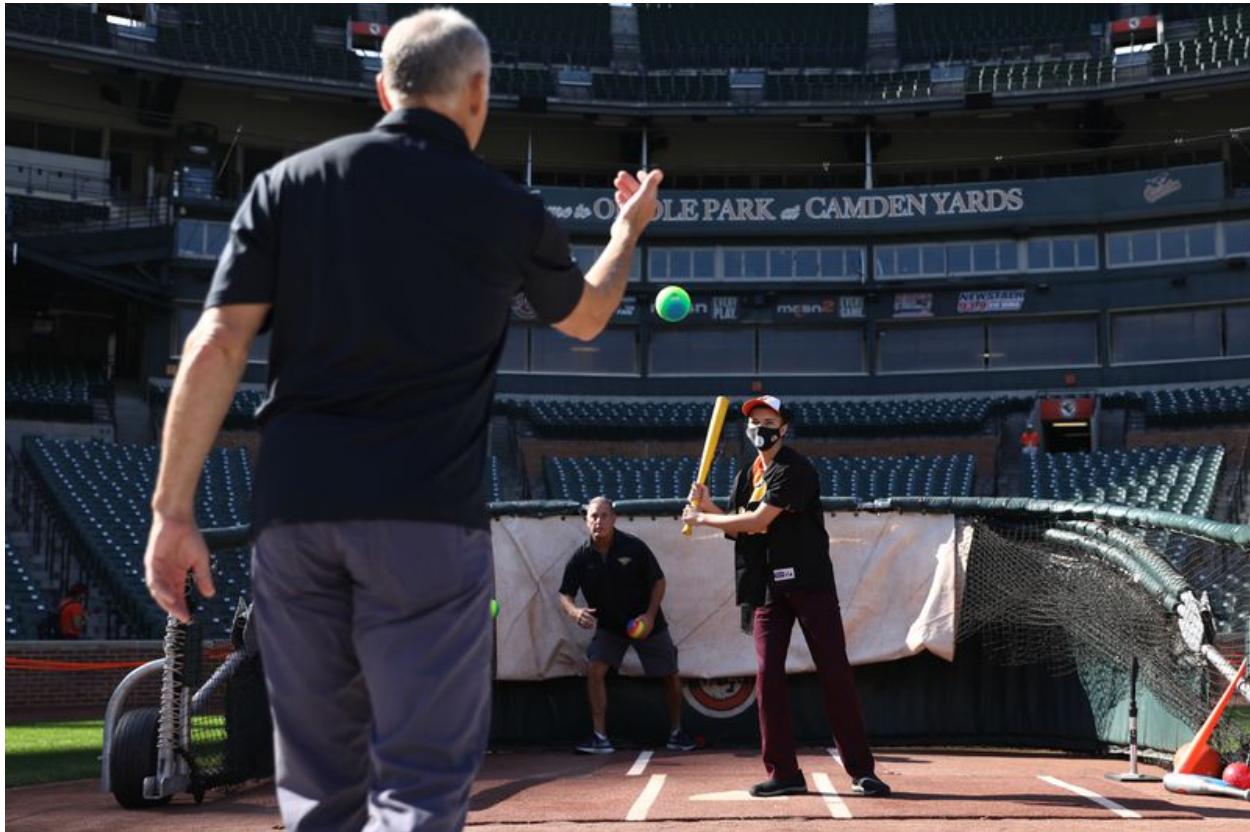


Orioles Hall of Famer Mike Bordick and League of Dreams giving gift of baseball to region's youth with disabilities

By NATHAN RUIZ

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Orioles Hall of Fame member Mike Bordick is the chairman of League of Dreams, a Maryland nonprofit dedicated to providing special needs children and adults with the opportunity to play baseball and softball. Earlier this fall, the group had an event at Camden Yards in partnership with the Orioles. (Baltimore Orioles/Handout)

When Mike Bordick gets recognized, a small part of him isn't surprised. He spent 14 years in the major leagues, six of those as an Oriole en route to making the franchise's hall of fame. He followed that with a lengthy stint as a broadcaster for the team's Mid-Atlantic Sports Network.

So when a young woman with a mental disability approached him at a Baltimore City Therapeutic Recreation event several years ago and said she knew him, Bordick figured she was familiar with his playing or television career. Instead, the words she said next have stuck with him ever since.

“You taught me baseball!” she exclaimed.

Bordick, 56, is the chairman of League of Dreams, a Maryland-based nonprofit dedicated to providing disabled children and adults the opportunity to play baseball and softball adaptively. He’s been involved with the organization for about 15 years. A decade before the young woman approached Bordick, she attended a camp at Ridge Ruxton School where he was among the volunteers teaching the basics of a game to children who might otherwise not have the opportunity to play it.

“That it had that much of an impact on her to where she would remember it 10 years later, it blew me away,” Bordick said. “And that’s the thing. These kids just do not forget their great experiences. It locks in with them. And it just becomes even more impactful.”



Mike Bordick, a member of the Orioles Hall of Fame, is the chairman of League of Dreams, a Maryland nonprofit dedicated to providing disabled children and adults with the opportunity to play baseball and softball. Earlier this fall, the group had an event at Camden Yards in partnership with the Orioles. (Baltimore Orioles/Handout)

Frank Kolarek founded League of Dreams in 2003. Throughout his minor league playing career in the Oakland Athletics organization, and eventually his time as a coach and scout, Kolarek made sure he found volunteer opportunities in each city he was in, giving children tours of facilities and introducing them to players.

“For them, it was a big league experience,” Kolarek said.

League of Dreams started with 17 children in a Baltimore County parking lot. In time, the organization blossomed.

As part of a recent fundraising effort, League of Dreams tried to calculate its impact. Kolarek, 66, said the group has had 29,000 children participate, and he figures there have been just as many volunteers.

That’s how Bordick got his start with the organization. Tim Bishop, a strength and conditioning coach during Bordick’s time with the Orioles, put him in touch with Kolarek, who has worked as a scout for Baltimore. Like Kolarek, Bordick began his career with the A’s, though about a decade later; Kolarek now finds it charming that League for Dreams’ colors are different shades of Oakland’s green and yellow.

From the start, Bordick was eager to help however he could, appearing at events and teaching fielding and hitting, or simply just taking the time to talk with a child who loved the sport. Each time he attends a League of Dreams event, Bordick can’t help but cry. “Nothing really has felt more rewarding to me, other than raising my own kids, than helping kids with special needs enjoy the game of baseball,” Bordick said. “Just brings you to tears to think of how much love is in their heart, and they just want to share it. Every one of these kids with special needs just wants to open up and be given these extra opportunities to share themselves.”

Justin Jaquis is among those the program has helped. As he gets set to start an internship this fall with the Auburn University football program, he recognizes how valuable League of Dreams was in preparing him for this opportunity.

Jaquis, 21, has cerebral palsy, a physical disability that limits his mobility and requires him to move by walker or wheelchair, but never kept him from wanting to play baseball. His mother, Judie Jaquis, figures a visit to Chicago's Wrigley Field as a 4-month-old made a lasting imprint.

"There was always a baseball in his hands," she said.

But Justin's condition meant his mother had trouble finding somewhere for him to play. She eventually discovered League of Dreams and got in touch with Kolarek. From then on, Justin had the chance not only to play baseball, but also to do it with his peers.

"It allowed me to play with a bunch of different people and make friends and relationships and connections that will last a lifetime," Justin Jaquis said.

Those connections went beyond the fellow players. Judie Jaquis said they consider Kolarek and Bordick to be family.

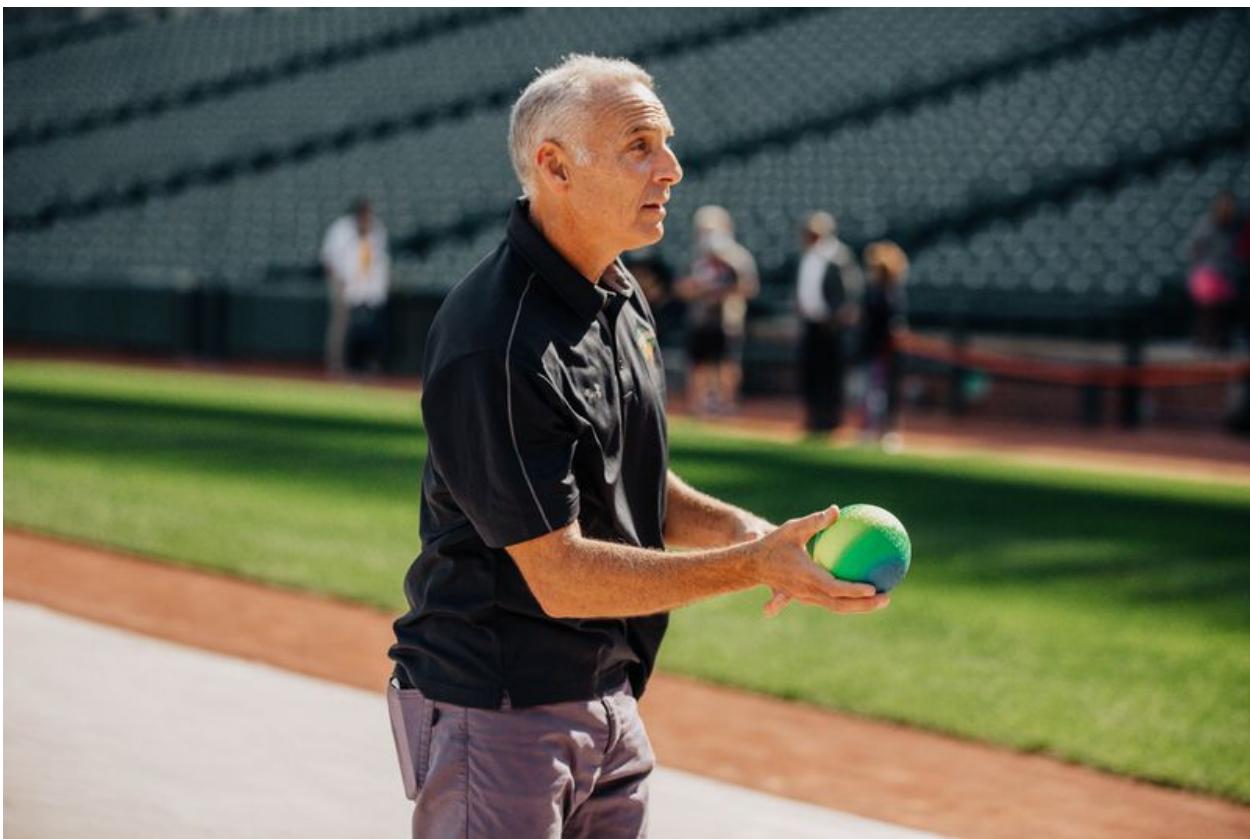
As a student at Atholton High School in Columbia, Justin Jaquis served as a manager for the varsity baseball team, setting up a League of Dreams event for Howard County residents where players from the junior varsity and varsity teams volunteered. In addition to helping at the event, Bordick took the time to speak with the players, sharing memories from his career.

In some ways, Bordick said, League of Dreams has a more profound effect on its volunteers than its participants.

"The impact that it has on them to work with their peers, to see the look on their faces, to see how rewarding it is and then the ability to take that back out in their community is probably as impactful as anything that the League of Dreams could do," Bordick said. "It just makes people better. It makes communities better. It makes kids more understanding of their peers and just find ways to help and, ultimately, that's the goal, to help put smiles on all kids' faces."

Kolarek agreed, noting that having a former major leaguer in Bordick involved sets an example for the young players assisting at events.

“His career speaks for itself as an Oriole Hall of Famer, but he’s a hall-of-fame guy,” Kolarek said. “There is nothing he wouldn’t do for League of Dreams and our children.”



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Justin Jaquis said he still keeps in contact with the professional players he’s crossed paths with, including Chicago White Sox first baseman Gavin Sheets, son of former Oriole Larry Sheets, and Baltimore pitcher Isaac Mattson. Both played in the Cal Ripken Collegiate Baseball League with the Baltimore Redbirds, which held an annual League of Dreams day before the team shut down in 2018.

League of Dreams regularly partners with other teams in the region, with the Orioles welcoming a large group to Camden Yards this fall.

Justin Jaquis’ time with League of Dreams taught him the importance of building those relationships, and he carried it with him into college at Bowling Green State, where he majored in sports management and spent two years as a student manager with the

women's volleyball team.

At Auburn, he'll get to work in various aspects of the program, from operations to recruiting to player personnel, finding which area most excites him as he dives into a career in college athletics.

"Hopefully, in 10 years, I have a bunch of connections to baseball programs to be able to help Frank — connect who I know at whatever school with Frank and help League of Dreams continue to grow," Jaquis said.

League of Dreams also has its eyes on the future. Through sponsorships and grants, the organization is hoping to extend its reach within and beyond Maryland.

"The model that we've created can work anywhere," Bordick said. "If we can continue to expand and push this across the United States, hey, why not even think globally?"

From a parking lot to Oriole Park, League of Dreams' growth is evident. Yet no matter where it goes from here, its largest impacts come in the smallest moments, like parents seeing their child play baseball for the first time.

"I knew I was beaming," Judie Jaquis recalled. "But I was also crying because I wanted him to be like every other kid who played rec baseball and did things that all the other kids could do. And this was his place."



Nathan Ruiz

CONTACT

Nathan Ruiz is an Orioles and sports reporter for The Baltimore Sun. A 2017 Oklahoma State graduate, Nathan joined The Sun in 2019 after covering his alma mater for The Oklahoman, where he interned previously. He also interned at his hometown Reno Gazette-Journal in Nevada, The Dallas Morning News and MLB.com, covering the San Diego Padres.