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Wheeling and dreaming

A former gang member hopes to start anew with softball

By **MATT BEARDMORE**
Contributing Writer

His old family tried to kill him. But his new brothers and sisters have given him a reason to live.

Forty-six-year-old Hector Bruno has traded in his life on the streets for a life of hope and a Field of Dreams. The former gang member is now the second baseman for a wheelchair softball team.

As a young man growing up on Chicago's South Side, Bruno fell in with the wrong crowd. After joining the Latin Souls as a 13-year-old, Bruno was trapped into a gang lifestyle that was taking him nowhere fast.

He dropped out of Tilden High School in 1976 after his junior year and enlisted in the United States Army. Following two years of service and an honorable discharge, Bruno returned to his hometown—a place that had not forgotten that one of its own had left without saying goodbye.

"Before I joined the service, I did not tell the gang I was leaving, and you're not supposed to do that," Bruno said. "Once you're in a gang you're in for life."

And his life was nearly taken away.

Shortly after returning from his military service, Bruno was

physical recovery at the RIC lasted five to six months, but it did little to rehabilitate his gang mentality.

"When I got out of RIC I just went back to the streets," Bruno said.

He returned home to live with his mother, Gladys, 65, and although the gang did not harass him anymore, Bruno began to abuse alcohol and drugs and became severely depressed.

Within a year of being released from the RIC, Bruno shot himself three times—twice in the right foot and once in the left. He was admitted to a mental institution where he stayed for a month while being treated for depression.

Bruno said the medications he took at the mental hospital put him in a different state of mind.

"I was like a zombie," he said. Today, Bruno still lives with his mother and younger brother Miguel, 45.

"My mom - her nerves are shot," Bruno said. "I really ruined my mother's nerves. But she stuck with me all this time, never let me down. [My mom and brother] have been a blessing to me."

And so has his new extended family.

While watching TV at home two years ago, Bruno saw a commercial for Cubs Care, a charitable fund aimed at helping those in need, and decided to call the number the following day.

Bruno contacted Keith Wallace, program specialist at the RIC, who encouraged Bruno to attend their softball practice.

"I came out, tried out for the team, and thank God I made it," Bruno said. "Before I got into sports, I was just hanging around the streets doing nothing. Just hanging around the streets, drinking, doing no good."

But now, Bruno is making good as he begins his second season with the RIC Cubs.

Bruno focuses as much on his rehab as he does when he's playing the infield for the Cubs. He's at the RIC three times a week for two hours and completes cardiovascular and weightlifting exercises for upper arm strength.

"He's very enthusiastic, especially about working out," said Jocee Volk, an exercise physiologist at the RIC. "He's an extremely hard worker."

Bruno just started hand cycling, and he's constantly trying new exercises. Volk said Bruno's current goals are to become faster and hit the ball harder.

"He's very dedicated," Volk said. "He motivates everyone else."

Bruno said he also has his sights set on completing a marathon later this year.

"He's really working hard because this is something he wants to excel at," Wallace said. "I wish I could instill that into all of my players."

Bruno's desire and willingness to overcome obstacles are extraordinary, however, his spinal injury is not uncommon.

According to the National Spinal Cord Injury Center in Birmingham, Ala., an estimated 250,000 to 400,000 individuals are living with a spinal cord injury or spinal dysfunction. Acts of violence account for approximately 24 percent of all spinal cord injuries, and according to the NSCIC,

these types of injuries have overtaken falls as the second most common source of spinal cord injury in the last four years.

The bullet that entered Bruno's abdomen injured his thoracic vertebrae and resulted in immediate paralysis.

"He's really working hard because this is something he wants to excel at. I wish I could instill that into all of my players."

Keith Wallace
RIC program specialist

Bruno said he occasionally feels spasms below his hips, although Dr. Lawrence C. Vogel, medical director of the Spinal Cord Injury Program and Chief of Pediatrics at Shriners Hospitals for Children in Chicago, said that is most likely just a reflex.

"The ultimate goal is to get the person back into the community and get them functioning," Vogel said. "It's a continuing process with patient and family."

Bruno and the RIC Cubs practice at California Park, near California Avenue and Irving Park Road. Their \$300,000 Field of Dreams was made a reality three years ago, thanks to funding from Cubs Care and the Chicago Park District.

In April, Cubs Care donated an additional \$50,000 to the RIC and the Cubs to help fund equipment and travel costs. The RIC Cubs recently returned from Florida, and have games scheduled in Nebraska, Ohio and New York.

The field is also the home of the Chicago Park District/Cubs Care Buddy Baseball program, a league for both disabled and non-disabled children.

Wallace attended Grambling State University in Louisiana, where he earned his Bachelor's of Science in Leisure Studies.

He worked in Special Olympics for three years before accepting a position at the RIC in 2002.

And despite having dreams of continuing his own baseball career - he had a tryout with the Independent League's Gary Railcats in May - Wallace is focused on helping the RIC Cubs become a better team.

"I can relate to the games and I can teach them things," Wallace said. "They're already talented but I can have my input as a former baseball player."

Wallace said he runs the Cubs' practice like he would any other team. And Wallace works them hard.

The Cubs' practice on May 16 began promptly at 6:30 p.m., as Bruno and the 15 others began with a two-lap warm up around the perimeter of the field. After the team stretched, the players took their positions in the field and Wallace stood on the mound to throw batting practice.

With two of the players pitching along the right-field line, Bruno and the Cubs took their hacks at Wallace. Some of the players used a wooden frame to

keep their wheelchairs from moving inside the batter's box, and all swung with one arm.

As practice continued, Wallace led the Cubs in situational-hitting drills. "Man on first and second." "Hit-and-run." Wallace directed the team and applauded the Cubs' infielders, who leaned down out of their wheelchairs and scooped up ground balls with an ease that would have made the team at Clark and Addison proud.

There was plenty of laughter as the Cubs practiced, but Wallace and the team were serious. Wallace was always teaching. He did his best to pickoff runners who were straying too far off first base. While the team was executing a base running drill, some of the players didn't pick up his stop sign at third base, and Wallace was quick to let them hear about it. He was firm with his instructions, but the Cubs appreciated what he was doing for them.

"He couldn't be a better coach," Bruno said. "He never lets you down. Whatever you need, you can count on Keith."

The Cubs practiced relay throws from the outfield and double play combinations in the infield. The No. 12 jersey on his back may not look the same, but Bruno picks the ball at second like Ryne Sandberg and flips the ball to the shortstop with the greatest of ease.

"He was kind of timid in playing [when he started] and now he's got more confidence in his game," Wallace said.

"Before he got involved, he was just sitting at home doing nothing. He comes out here, he's among his peers and people he can relate to."

California Park has no lights, but Wallace continued the practice as darkness took over the field. After the Cubs completed four laps around the perimeter of the outfield fence, Wallace had the team line up on the first base line.

Wallace did his best imitation of a drill instructor as he counted down from 10 and sent the Cubs on what seemed like a never-ending string of sprints toward the left field fence.

The team then arranged itself behind home plate for one-on-one races. One player sped down the third base line to the 150-foot sign near the left field foul pole and back home, while the other raced down the right field line. The loser had to take another lap. After Bruno lost his one-on-one sprint he said, "Man, I'm feeling my age."

Even Wallace got in a chair and took part in the drill. His race was close, but he was edged at home by one of the Cubs' fastest players.

"They're phenomenal - the things that they can do and the things they've overcome," Wallace said. "These guys are just playing hard and they're not complaining. I just get up and go in the morning. It's a process for some of these guys. They have a lot of things they have to think about but they're here every Monday, Wednesday and Saturday, and they come to practice, and they practice hard."

And they're also having a lot of fun.

"It really changed my life a lot," Bruno said. "It's like a family here. We look out for each other, we care for each other."

This story previously appeared in the June 24 issue of the Chicago Journal, but Bruno was misidentified in the headline and Beardmore was misidentified as a writer for Medill News Service, so we're running it again with corrections. The Chicago Journal regrets the errors.

attending a birthday party in Chicago for his cousin Vicky when he was told that someone wanted to speak with him outside.

"When I walked out the door they already pointed the gun towards me," Bruno recalled.

And in an instant, the hollow point bullet from the .357-caliber Magnum pierced Bruno's abdomen and caused a T12 spinal cord injury that instantly paralyzed him from the waist down.

"That was their main goal," Bruno said. "Shoot me and kill me or put me like this in this situation."

He spent considerable time at Holy Cross Hospital before transferring to the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago. Bruno's

QUEEN'S

Continued from page 1

who also volunteers at the J. Ira and Nicki Harris Family Hostel at 24 E. Congress. "I asked them, 'Why are you doing this?'"

They said, 'It's what the mayor wants.'"

On Wednesday, Schubert was planning to partake in a protest of the closing, organized by the Campaign for a Free and Clear Lakefront, by dressing up as Queen Elizabeth II and giving a rousing speech about her royal desire to keep the land accessible to pedestrians. As a fledgling monarch in 1959, Elizabeth II inspired the Queen's Landing name by docking her ship at the site and crossing over to Buckingham Fountain.

Meanwhile, Bob O'Neill, head of the Grant Park Advisory Council, was busy earlier this week planning an emergency Grant Park Advisory Council meeting on the closing, to be held Thursday, July 21 at 6:30 p.m. at Daley Bicentennial Plaza, 337 E. Randolph.

O'Neill criticizes the city for taking down the crossing too hastily and without public input, but sees the shutdown as an opportunity to push for either a pedestrian bridge or an underpass across Lakeshore Drive from Buckingham Fountain to Monroe Harbor.

"For years I've received all sorts of feedback about how people want a safe and attractive crossing at Queen's Landing," he says. "We really need to fund it there."

Chicago Department of Transportation spokesman Brian



Photo by Laura Putre

Kathy Schubert contemplates jumping the fence across from Monroe Harbor.

Steele said the decision to remove the pedestrian crossing was made not by CDOT but by the newly formed Traffic Management Authority, part of the Mayor's Office. Steele referred other questions to Monique Bond, head of the TMA, who did not respond.

Plans for twin foot bridges by Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava were in the works for a while for Queens Landing, with a \$19 million budgeted for the project. But those plans were tabled after the Sept. 2001 terrorist attacks, O'Neill says.

Last year, GPAC held a symposium on the future of Queen's Landing, which was well-attended. "There was a discussion for

two, three hours," O'Neill says. "People feel passionate about being able to cross at Buckingham Fountain."

O'Neill was not particularly a fan of the stoplight. "I found it depressing to cross that much asphalt," he says. "I remember taking friends through, thinking 'I can't stand being there because of all that asphalt. This is not an elegant crossing. I feel like I'm going through a strip mall to get to the lake.'"

Kathy Schubert says she would prefer to see all of Lakeshore Drive ripped out, rather than a bridge over pavement. So it goes without saying that Queen Elizabeth would, too.

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