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It's 'Play ball!' in Bedford Hills for Little Leaguers

By GRAHAM BIPPART

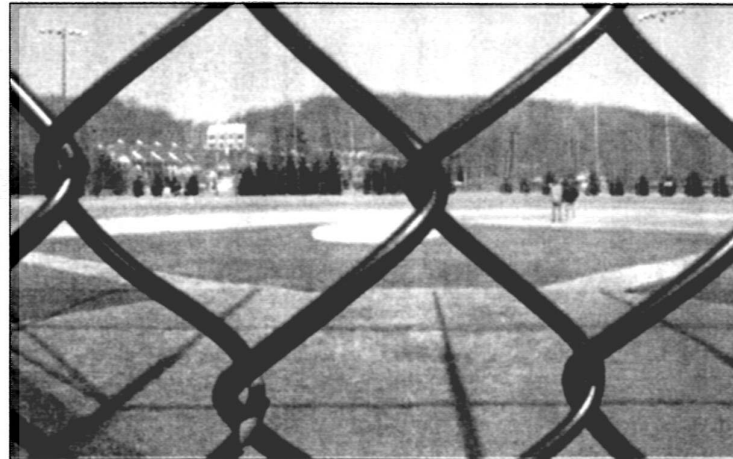
In the clubhouse at Joseph A. Frank field inside Bedford Hills Memorial Park, Brendan DiRago shook his head gravely, silently, in answer to his father's question.

"Do you think we could get that 'B' turned into an 'N' and 'Y' interlocking?" asked Bill DiRago, president of the Bedford Hills/Katonah Little League Association. Brendan, his son, had entered the room wearing the crimson Red Sox insignia on his fitted baseball cap.

In a family with three generations of involvement in Bedford Hills Little League, some generational differences are perhaps inevitable. Whatever the differences, however, this is a family duly committed to the task at hand.

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Here, in the top floor of the snack bar, Bill and Cindy DiRago are beginning another day of preparations for the upcoming Little League season. Scores of brand-new helmets, complete with face masks, are lining the fold-out tables



GRAHAM BIPPART PHOTO

View through the fence, at Bedford Hills Memorial Park.

in the room, where Bill and Cindy do most of their administrative work.

"We have all new equipment this year," said Mr. DiRago. Supplies for all 28 teams, from T-ball to age 16 and under, are stored here, from catchers equipment to T-shirts and jerseys. New bases with magnetic tearaway strips, to prevent injury from sliding, are also awaiting players in the field.

Mr. and Ms. DiRago have been doing renovations on the facilities and fields themselves since September. "We're here almost every day," said Ms. DiRago, vice president of the association.

Most of their time here is spent answering phone calls, making
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Bedford Hills Little Leaguers say 'Play ball!'

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schedules for the teams, holding board meetings, and getting uniforms ready, which includes providing teams with local sponsors. "In addition to getting my own kids ready [for the season], I'm getting 271 other kids ready, as well," said Ms. DiRago.

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Renovations have included the gutting and refinishing of the Snack Bar, for which new cabinets have been built, new housing for the pitching machine in the field's two batting cages, and new clay for the baseball diamonds themselves, among other things.

According to Mr. and Ms. DiRago, there were plans to replace the largest of the two fields' outfield with turf, but fund-raising proved insufficient. "We couldn't raise a third of what was needed," said Ms. DiRago, so letters were sent to donors declaring that their money would be returned. "But most people let us keep it for other work."

Donations are the foundation of the DiRagos' attempt to upgrade and maintain these fields for the area's baseball fans. "We're kind of separate from the town," said Mr. DiRago. "We don't answer to anyone." As such, fund-raising and sponsorship are the sole means of revamping the fields and maintaining their quality. The fence surrounding the larger field is adorned with the advertisement boards of various businesses.

According to Mr. DiRago, the two fields under their control (there are

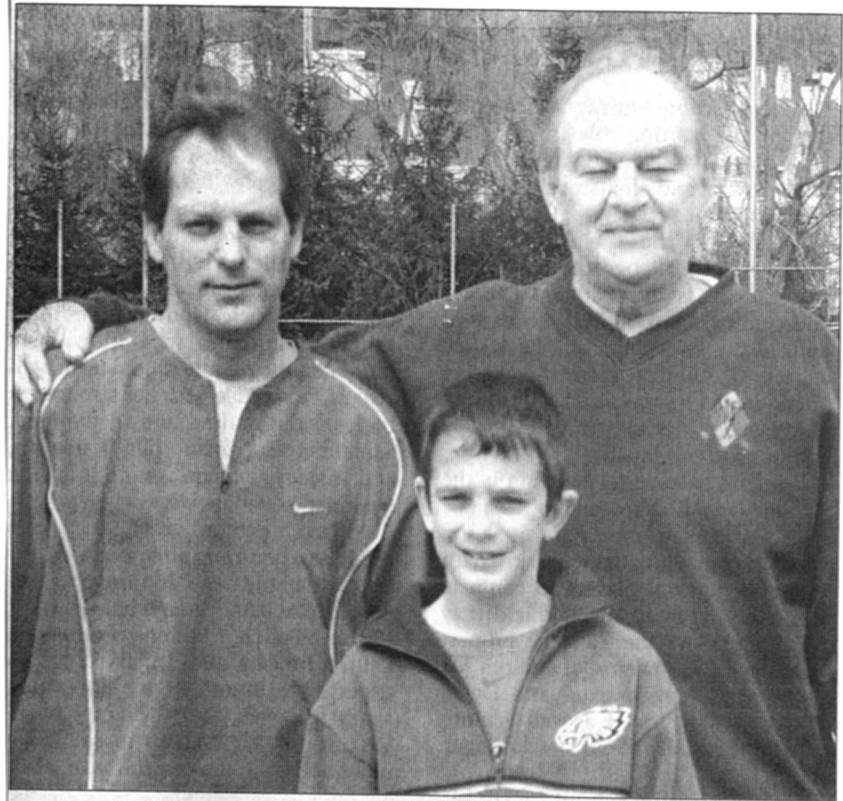
three total; one is under the town's proprietorship) had once been among the finest maintained fields in the area, but due to insufficient funds and dwindling volunteers, "the field has gone down a lot in quality."

It is important, then, to show those who do donate and volunteer that the money is being put to good use. "As long as the money doesn't run out, we just have to keep working and putting it back into the league," said Mr. DiRago. "We have to show them that we're doing something."

One look at the fields, and their attending batting cages and snack bar, and it is clear that the changes in the last few months have been formidable. The weeds that once obscured the fenced-in sides of the batting cages have been cleared, and where once the pathway between the snack bar and the AA field (the smaller of the two fields) was bordered by rotting railway ties holding up the ground on one side, now there is a sleek stone wall. Along the foul lines of the AAA field, all new sod has been placed. The AA field has been expanded, and there are plans to provide a picnic area near the snack bar.

Renovations will continue into this, the second year of Mr. and Ms. DiRago's administration of the Little League. Said Ms. DiRago of working together with her husband, "We've always had great communication. We've been married 15 years, and this project just makes it that much stronger."

The season begins on April 22. "Nothing is more gratifying than seeing these kids on opening day," said Ms. DiRago.



GRAHAM BIPPART PHOTO

"Three generations": president Bill DiRago, left; former President John DiRago, with son, Ricky DiRago.