

# Homeless Kids Discover Disc Golf

Photos & Story by Diane N #36068

For those who think the topic of homeless children and youth can get downright depressing, that's not always the case. Sometimes a ray of sunshine can brighten this bleak subject, and for a group of kids without homes and a determined cadre of volunteers, "HEAR US! Disc Us!" provided that spark.

Last spring I applied for my PDGA membership, figuring my \$50 is well-spent for the perks I get. I then applied for, and was awarded, a \$500 Innovation Grant for HEAR US to share this awesome sport with kids who are/were homeless.

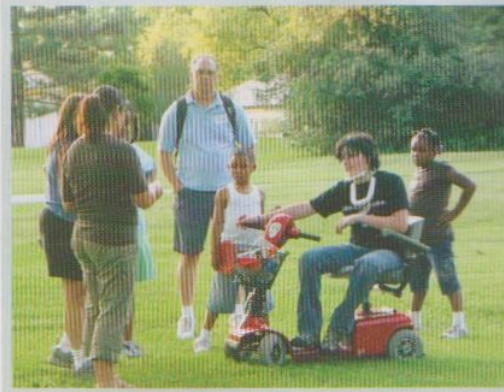
HEAR US is my national nonprofit organization that gives voice and visibility to homeless kids. I've been involved in this issue for over 23 years: ran shelters (Joliet and Aurora, Illinois), wrote a book about homelessness, and helped get a law passed in Illinois and nationally to make it easier for homeless kids to attend school.

HEAR US was my innovative concept. Four years ago I began traveling this country's backroads in my little RV, which serves as my home and office. I filmed kids willing to talk about their experiences of homelessness and how important school is to them. My Own Four Walls is our proud creation, a series of short documentaries featuring homeless kids (DVD, \$40, [www.hearus.us](http://www.hearus.us)). I also conduct presentations on this subject to a variety of audiences, including schools and community groups.

My home base for over 40 years was in Chicago's western suburbs. My homelessness connections are strong there, and Bridge Communities in Glen Ellyn has been a longtime favorite organization of mine. So I contacted them to see if their kids would be interested in a disc golf outing. Sure!

On a spectacular Wednesday in August (which happened to be my birthday), a group of excited kids and moms gathered at the new course at Castaldo Park in Woodridge, Illinois to learn the ins-and-outs of disc golf. My good friends, Helen Jilekand and Karen Turk, came along to assist. Our new disc golf friends—Cathy and Mike Kamm from Midwest Disc Golf, and mentor, "Johnny D" DeWitt—rounded out our team.

Barb Trczinski, Bridge Communities' education maven, had spread the word among the Bridge Communities' 70+ families (yes, over 70 families in



wealthy DuPage County are homeless) and her word worked. We had a bunch of kids; I never did count. Moms got to watch or play, their choice, plus received back-to-school supplies from Barb after the end of the event.

To get everyone fueled up and rarin' to go, the neighborhood Nancy's Pizza donated six super-size pizzas which amply fed the group. The laughter and excitement that poured from these kids—many under 10 plus a few adroit teens—was infectious—even before we started playing! None had a clue about the sport, but the idea of an outing with a promise of fun was enough for them.

The next exciting part was giving them their very own disc, and letting them put their name on it. "I get to keep it!" was the typical astounded response, each followed by a huge thank you.

After divvying up the groups—Helen and I with the wee-ones, Cathy, Mike and Johnny with the big kids—we hit this sweet newly-opened nine-hole course designed by Midwest Disc Golf.

We figured our pint-sized friends would only want to play a little bit, but they avidly went at it, following instructions: don't



hit someone in the head or other body parts, wait till we tell you to chase down your disc, and try to throw it toward the target. We let a group of non-HEAR US teens play through, with our kids gushing awe at their well-practiced drives. "See, that's what you can learn to do," we optimistically pointed out. Some of the least likely suspects became prime time players. Little Sara amazed even herself, with a smile eventually breaking out from her stoic countenance.

When I snuck over to see how Cathy, Mike, and Johnny were doing with the older kids, I smiled as I snapped a few pictures. The kids were so into it they didn't pay any attention to me taking pictures. By this time, most of the kids had gotten so good at the game I would have thought they were playing for a long time. Good teachers? Yes, but this is the kind of game where newbies can experience success early on. One teen, on a scooter because of a severe physical impairment, found out that disc golf is a game he can play and enjoy. Moms sat back and watched their kids romp through a beautiful park, happy that this sport wouldn't cost bundles and could involve kids and adults of all ages. A couple of moms ventured closer to watch and even tried flinging a few discs themselves.

Mike, Cathy, and Johnny D shared their skills and their love for kids. Mike and Cathy brought a box of gently-used discs that we distributed. Karen oversaw distribution of scads of prizes for everything we could think of: best shot, closest to the basket, longest distance, straightest, and following directions.

I don't want to diminish the plight of over 1.5 million kids and their families who struggle to survive without a place to call home. Something needs to be done, and HEAR US continuously has grass roots advocacy campaigns to push for solutions. But an outing like this gives all involved a chance to change gears and have some fun. Disc golf, a sport I love and enjoy playing in each state I travel through, is something that should be shared with as many people as possible. HEAR US thanks the members of the PDGA for making that possible!

To learn more about HEAR US, visit [www.hearus.us](http://www.hearus.us).

## 2008 PDGA Innovation Grant Winners

Casey Farrell—Occidental, California  
*Connecting Youth Outdoors with Disc Golf:* By purchasing three baskets and some discs, Casey Farrell introduces disc golf to San Francisco Bay Area youth at CYO camps located in nearby redwood forests. Over 12,000 youths visit the camps each year.

Dan Doyle #310—Warwick NY  
*Discovery - Recreation Gateway to Wellness:* Dan has been a longtime disc golf player and promoter in New York. DisCOVERY uses disc golf in clinics and exhibitions working with individuals, organizations, and businesses to improve health and wellness. His projects include: a private school for troubled teens, an inner-city daycare center, a women's health and fitness expo, sending discs to Afghanistan, installing a disc golf course at a VA hospital, and more.

Joel Svec—Billings, Montana  
*Youth Disc Golf Program:* Joel intends to build a disc program in the Billings YMCA, where he is an activities director. Aimed at children ages six to 13, Joel will buy five portables and 30 discs to be used in various parks in Billings.

Ryan Lane #19359—Bend, Oregon  
*DISCdrive Project:* Ryan is organizing a one-day national event to be held in October. Disc golfers will bring their used discs to an event site to recycle them. Participants will learn more about disc golf through demonstrations. The donated discs would later be donated to youth programs such as schools and YMCAs.

Adam Riddell #31587—Alexandria, Virginia  
*Diversifying Disc Golf:* Adam, a second-year teacher, will start the Wolverine Disc Golf Club. The aim is to attract at-risk high school students and get them off the streets and into a healthy lifetime sport. West Potomac High School is 23% black and 21% Hispanic.

Brian Thigpen—Mangham, Louisiana  
*Louisiana Purchase Council Disc Golf Project:* Brian, in a partnership with the Twin City Disc Golf Club of Monroe, Louisiana, will promote disc golf at Boy Scout camps in the area.

Karen Whetzel—Woodstock Virginia  
*Shenandoah County Disc Golf Day Camp:* A collaboration between county schools and local parks, Karen's program will introduce disc golf to teachers who would then introduce the sport to their students as a means to healthful recreation.

Tom Coffin #27172—Falls Church, Virginia  
*Washington D.C. Disc Club Outreach Program:* Tom will instruct and demonstrate disc golf in Washington parks through a program aimed at children ages five to 18. Tom's father taught him to throw frisbee back in the 70's, and he's been playing ever since.

For more information on the program, contact the PDGA. To download a grant application, go to [pdga.com/documents/innovation-grant-application.com](http://pdga.com/documents/innovation-grant-application.com).

