

CSD scrambles to meet opening date: Bank of America offers to finance Jeff Mitchell-tribute Little League field

By Mike Roberts, Village Life staff writer

(01.24.07) Bank of America wants to team up with the El Dorado Hills Little League to create a tribute to slain Sacramento County Sheriff Deputy Jeff Mitchell that his six-year old son Jake can enjoy for years to come.

Deputy Jeff Mitchell Field will fill a hole in the EDH little league landscape, creating a premiere field and training center for triple-A and majors-level little league baseball throughout the summer, and regional tournament play in the fall.

“Best of all, the memorial represents something Jeff loved,” said Bill Burke, a close friend of Mitchell and his wife, Crystal.

Mitchell, who was shot to death during a routine traffic stop on Oct. 27, 2006, was a lifelong baseball fan.

“Jeff and his brothers grew up at the baseball field,” said Crystal Mitchell, reached by phone at her home in Serrano. “He had a love and passion for baseball.”

Mitchell and Burke coached Jake Mitchell’s EDH Little League South T-ball team, the Cubs, last year. Jake, 6, will move up to a “coach-pitch” team this summer. An important element of the overall project is a secondary “coach-pitch” field which Jake would play on this spring.

Crystal Mitchell said that her husband loved playing baseball with this son. “They practiced all the time. It was very important to him. With his work hours, he sacrificed a lot of sleep to be there for Jake.”

The idea for the Mitchell tribute came from Bank of America Sacramento President Rick Maya, who lives near the Mitchells in Serrano. He assigned Eric Stanion, who handles corporate philanthropy for Bank of America in the Sacramento region to look into it. Stanion, who is also an EDH resident, contacted Crystal Mitchell, Little League South President David Koch and Burke, who has become a defacto park designer.

The Bank of America sponsors Little League International, and has tentatively agreed to fund all improvements to an existing baseball field to create the tribute. “We don’t want this to cost the CSD anything beyond admin and upkeep,” said Stanion. Exact costs won’t be known until a final plan is complete.

The field behind Brooks Elementary School in Park Village emerged as the most likely renovation candidate in the CSD Parks and Planning Committee meeting on Jan. 18. The committee heard a presentation by Stanion, Burke and Koch that contained a sense of urgency, as the sponsors desperately want to get the memorial field in place by the beginning of little league season, April 14.

“How often does a corporate sponsor come along with cash in hand?” asked Koch, who encouraged the committee to expedite the planning process while Bank of America money is on the table. “We want Jake Mitchell to play on this field this summer,” he said.

Stanion assured the committee that “there is money available now, and we will encourage our partners to contribute as well.” However, if the project delays a season, “I can’t make any promises,” he said.

Burke told the committee that he presented his preliminary design to Crystal Mitchell and “she thought it would be a great tribute to Jeff.”

Features being discussed include a scoreboard, home run fencing, a commemorative archway bearing Mitchell’s name, a new backstop, foul poles, a grass infield, bleachers, snack shack, landscaping, permanent bathrooms and other field improvements.

“We’re taking Crystal Mitchell’s lead on what she wants to see,” said Stanion.

Mitchell asked that the memorial be named simply “Deputy Jeff Mitchell Field,” and that it contain at a minimum, a permanent outfield fence, an electronic scoreboard and a grass infield. “If this is going to be a tribute to him I want it to be done right,” she said.

Recently elected CSD Director Tony Rogozinski, who now sits on the Parks and Planning Committee with Dave Trapani, campaigned on improving athletic fields in EDH, creating a premier field for tournaments and the importance of corporate park sponsorship.

Burke and Koch credit Rogozinski for quietly “coaching” them through the process thus far. “He’s been our CSD ambassador,” said Koch.

The Community Service District has received numerous proposals to commemorate Mitchell. His name has been proposed for the new Teen Center and skate park, a section of Serrano’s trail system and a park in Serrano.

“I’m so grateful that people want to honor Jeff in some way,” said Crystal Mitchell. “I think the baseball field would be the best way.”

The proposed location behind Brooks Elementary School is formally named for former CSD General Manager Bill McCabe, although the common name for the field is Brooks. A stone memorial to McCabe sits behind the current backstop. There is also a sign in the parking area calling the area Bertylson Field.

Current CSD General Manager Wayne Lowery felt that the memorial to McCabe could be relocated without much opposition.

The CSD owns the property, but has a joint use agreement for the field with Buckeye Union School District. Until recently, soccer was played there, but it has been moved. “Brooks gym classes have to be accommodated, and there is still some flag football being played there,” said Lowery, who felt that suitable arrangements could be made.

Buckeye Union School District Facilities Director Ray Boike was enthused to hear about the project. “I haven’t seen any plans yet, but any improvements we could do out there would be great,” he said in a phone conversation.

Acknowledging that some of the improvements might not be complete by April 14, a confident Lowery said “I’m 90 percent confident we can make this work with Buckeye by April 14.”

Last Friday morning, Burke and Stanion were out on the field behind William Brooks School, imagining possible improvements. Surveying the field, Burke said “It’s just about perfect.” Stanton agreed.

Burke, Koch and Stanton will make a detailed proposal to the full CSD Board of Directors on Feb. 8.

Crystal Mitchell encouraged organizers to keep her in the loop. “I can help out,” she said. “People might listen to me.” mroberts@villagelife.com