

Elyssa Pyle

When it comes to shy kids, many parents often turn to team sports. They can help them come out of their shell as they are forced to communicate with each other and work toward a common goal. However, most of these parents achieve this by enrolling their kids in sports, not just taking them to a game, but not Sandra Pyle.

Sandra described her daughter, Elyssa, as “painfully shy and easily intimidated,” but now that she has Fuel hockey in her life, she has become much more confident and sure of herself.

“I took her to a Fuel game last season [as] her first hockey experience ever, thinking she would most likely not like it because it was really physical and possibly intimidating to her,” Sandra said. “She fooled me big time! She loved it, everything about it.”

Beyond the sixty minutes of play, what made Elyssa love the game even more was her interactions with the players.

“At first, I was kind of like ‘I don’t know,’ but then [Garrett] Bembridge smiled at me, and fist bumped me and kind of gave me a wink,” Elyssa said.

Bembridge instantly became her favorite player. In her section, Elyssa became affectionately known as “The Little Bembridge Fan,” and Sandra said she is always the first to cheer for or defend him. Their bond helped Elyssa grow more confident, almost as a sense of assurance.

“When she gives #41 [a] thumbs up and he winks at her, her whole face lights up and I can see her confidence growing,” Sandra said. “‘If Garrett Bembridge likes me, then I must be okay’ – that’s what she thinks and that boy at school that makes fun of her...he is nothing now...Just that one little gesture has made her feel so much better about herself.”

Sandra praised all of the players for always “tak[ing] that extra minute to look and smile and fist bump.” Those little moments of recognition help Elyssa feel self-assured.

“She’s so much more confident, and a different kid,” Sandra said.

Elyssa took her new-found confidence to seek out the help of her school principal to start a campaign to raise money for the Make-A-Wish Foundation. She came up with the plan herself, only sharing her ideas with her mom after she talked to the principal.

This confidence shows at games, too. Elyssa used to shy away from dancing to “Chelsea Dagger” or yelling at games, but “now after a good game, her voice is gone and dancin’ feet are sore,” according to Sandra.

While Bembridge’s departure from the Fuel hurt Elyssa, her passion for the team remains. She spends her free time brushing up on statistics, standings, and rosters, and she never misses watching an away game on ECHL TV. Elyssa confidently refers to herself as a “Puck Head,” and she proudly shows off her family’s “Fuel Room” of memorabilia and memories.

Sandra credits the organization and their “Fuel Family” of fellow season ticketholders for Elyssa’s transformation, and all it took was one little wink.

“Just those few moments that the players take to acknowledge their fans can change everything for someone,” Sandra said. “Every person in the Fuel organization has made a difference in one little girl’s life, especially Garrett Bembridge. Although he is no longer part of the Fuel family, he is forever part of our hockey family...I am forever grateful for your kindness.”

Braxton Lewis

When Braxton Lewis was born, his parents would have probably called you crazy if you told them their son would grow up to be a hockey player in just a few years.

Braxton was born with a cleft palate, which can cause difficulty speaking and feeding. He was also born with muscle rigidity, which causes muscles to be continuously firm and tense, and can lead to a handful of related muscle diagnoses. Doctors warned Braxton's parents he may never walk right or could potentially always be a little bit developmentally behind.

"We went to Riley [Children's Hospital] five or six times a month the first year or so of his life," Lacey, Braxton's mom, said. "He's had nine surgeries already."

However, Braxton has proved himself to be a fighter. When he was 3 years old, he went ice skating for the first time and could not keep his balance without a little help. Four weeks later, though, he was registered for "Learn to Play" hockey, and he moved up to the Mite Minors youth hockey league.

"It's been amazing," Lacey said. "I've never seen a kid just be so passionate about a sport before."

Braxton dreams of being a goalie, and one of his favorite Fuel players is Mac Carruth. He's already started working hard on his goal, asking for goalie pads with a blocking glove for Christmas and playing on the ice rink in the family's front yard. Lacey said he plays from the time he gets home from preschool all the way until bedtime.

In addition to traveling to Indianapolis from Munice twice a week for Braxton's practices, they attend all home games.

"We try to get down here [to Indianapolis] to watch Fuel games. That way, we can be as a family and see how the players interact with him as a kid in the stands." Brandon, Braxton's dad, said. "It's a lot of fun watching him be cheerful about what's going on."

Braxton knows lots of the players from the post-game skates. They've given him practice pucks and game pucks, which fit in nicely with the rest of his hockey-centric room.

His parents take the games and these player interactions to remind Braxton this could be him if he keeps following his dreams.

"To take my son to games and show him this could be him in a few years is amazing to dream about," Lacey said.

Lacey credited the kind gestures players toward kids helps build that passion for the game as well as their dreams and the fact they can come true some day.

This passion has taken over the Lewis family, and Lacey admit she did not previously understand or enjoy hockey, but now appreciates and respects the game and the players.

"The atmosphere is more than words can describe," Lacey said. "The coaches, as well as the players, engage the youth at games and provide such a positive experience."

This positive experience transcends beyond game days, and can help kids find a new passion they, or their parents, may not have previously thought possible.

"Just to see the doctors say all that about [Braxton], and now he's 4 and playing on a hockey league – that's just amazing to see," Lacey said.

Terry Moore

For Terry Moore, growing up in a hockey arena was like growing up in a second home. The Fort Wayne native spent his time playing pick-up games of hockey in his basement with his younger brother or in Franke Park when the lakes would ice over, and his family had season tickets to the Komets.

“I had a small transistor radio, and I always listened to legendary broadcaster Bob Chase doing play-by-play while watching the game. The next morning, I always studied the morning newspaper follow-up of the game and the stats,” Moore said. “I was there when the first jersey number was retired...I saw all of the legends playing together.”

But hockey games were more than just a day out of the house – they were a form of escape for Moore.

“I grew up in a home with a lot of tension and domestic violence. Most of my memories from my youth are very unpleasant, filled with terror, fear, and trauma,” Moore said. “However, I do have some very positive memories...When we went to hockey games, everyone was happy, smiling, and having fun.”

The positive environment Moore found at Komets games was enduring, and it offered a sense of familiarity after he returned from his military service in Vietnam.

“I came home to a city that was much different than my home that I left. I was very homesick only to discover that home was no longer the same home,” Moore said. “But then, the voice of Bob Chase was still the same. The fun and excitement of Komets hockey was the same. That was home.”

Moore eventually relocated to Indianapolis, and he continued to be a Komets fan until the arrival of the Fuel. He is a season ticket holder, and he makes his passion about the team and the sport known. Some of Moore’s old friends in Fort Wayne contact him whenever they see him cheering for Fuel goals and victories against the Komets.

But Moore’s presence at games goes beyond another fan in the stands. He works hard to make sure players know they are appreciated.

“I’m usually at the games with a little white board down there to say things to encourage [the players], and build ‘em [sic] up and try and get their confidence up,” Moore said.

Always looking to assist people and help lift them up, Moore spends his life outside of Fuel games working diligently against domestic violence. He is a domestic violence counselor, and he has worked with the State of Indiana on intervention programs. Moore has created several of his own programs and organizations regarding the subject, including Nonviolent Alternatives. Nonviolent Alternatives was founded in 1991 and is a program to help people who are abusive learn how to change their behavior.

“I don’t want children to be living in fear the way that I was when I was a child,” Moore said. “Nobody wants to be miserable in their lives, and I believe that everybody deserves an opportunity to learn how to be happy.”