

CAP youth equipment locker gains traction

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It's Friday afternoon before Labor Day weekend. The warm reds and soft yellows that color the walls of the second floor of the Lower Columbia CAP building on Commerce Avenue are dimly lit by candles, table lamps and the eager glow of CAP employees preparing to escape for the holiday.

CAP is making a concerted effort to "go green" on this particular afternoon, and conserving light is at the top of the agenda.

Not that any of this helps contain the energy coming from Tobie Crocker's corner office. Crocker, the Cowlitz County program coordinator for Big Brothers and Big Sisters, is going all radioactive, sizzling and crackling with enthusiasm about her new idea.

Crocker's brainchild is the Youth Equipment Locker, a reuse/recycle program for football and soccer cleats that will be housed in the CAP Thrift Store at 1210 Maple, adjacent to the CAP parking lot off 12th Ave. The purpose of the Youth Equipment Locker is to give people a chance to recycle their children's used cleats which will be reconditioned and distributed to low-income children in Cowlitz County.

"Ever since I've been in social services, I've always been connected to the fact that there are kids with needs — especially when it comes to participating in sports," Crocker said. "It's become abundantly clear to me that a lot of kids don't participate because they don't have the right equipment, and their parents aren't able to pay the fees necessary to participate in sports. It really bothers me."

Crocker has made a career out of impacting youth. She coordinated the local "I Have A Dream" program for six years before joining Big Brothers and Big Sisters earlier this spring.

Crocker tells the story of a single father who came to her last June. The father was excited because he'd saved enough money to send his kids to a \$300 football camp. There was just one problem. The kids were enrolled in the camp, but they didn't have any shoes.

"He asked me if I had any resources to help him pay for cleats," she said. "I told him I would look around and call him back, but I couldn't figure anything out."

Imagine trying to blend into a team situation when you can't afford the proper equipment. For many kids, the cost of participation is too steep for them to ever find out whether they can throw a ball, catch a pass or make a block.

The costs are too steep for them to ever experience the benefits of being on a team.

And that's a shame.

Sports teach us so much. They teach teamwork which, God knows, we need nowadays. Sports teach us toughness. Mental fortitude. Sports teach us coping mechanisms to deal with the difficulties that pervade our everyday life.

But in our image-driven society, participation can be difficult. When your worth is measured in seconds, you're at a competitive disadvantage if you're running a 40-yard dash in slick-soled shoes against an opponent bedecked in the latest Swooshes.

"I know that a lot of youth programs have piles of cleats spread around throughout our community," Crocker said. "My idea was to bring it into one location."

And thanks to CAP, that idea is quickly becoming a reality.

Crocker points to a row inside the Thrift Store that will house the cleats. Everything will be cleaned and reconditioned. It will be affordable. It will be easily accessible. The store's hours of operation are Tuesday and Thursday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Crocker has already received her first batch of inventory from Facebook friends and mothers who happily delivered their children's shoes to Crocker. The back end of Crocker's SUV serves as a temporary housing location.

Soon, maybe next week, everything will be transferred into the Thrift Store.

"We will include other items as things arise," Crocker said. "But right now, I just want the word out that we are starting a county-wide recycle and reuse program with cleats."

Consider it done, Tobie. It's a great idea. It's a boon to the community. And who knows, maybe someday, it will be the launching ground for the next Brett Favre.

Dave Grumbois is a frequent contributor to The Daily News sports section.