

PROFILE

A Father's Love

Mitch Barnes' DREAM Foundation is making playgrounds accessible for special kids – including his son

Millions of American dads celebrated Father's Day last Sunday by spending more time playing with their kids. For Mitch Barnes, that includes taking his two sons to a playground that welcomes all youngsters – thanks in large part to his vision and dedication.

Born and raised in central North Carolina, Barnes considers 1986 a landmark time in his life: That was the year he became a wealth management advisor for Northwestern Mutual Financial Network and married his sweetheart, Meredith, who hails from Evansville, Ind.

Today, the Barnes household in Hikes Point includes sons Mitchell, 15, a sophomore at Male High School; and Marshall, 9, who attends Greathouse Shryock Traditional Elementary School. When Mitchell was young, they found that he had Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy, a genetic disorder. Neither side of the family had had any previous occurrences of it.

"We didn't know Mitchell had it until he was 4 years old," Mitch Barnes said. "We noticed that he just didn't run like other kids."

The couple learned that D.M.D. is one of nine forms of muscular dystrophy. Named for the physician who identified it, it typically is diagnosed in boys between the ages of 2 to 6. It is caused by a lack of dystrophin, a protein that helps keep muscle cells intact.

To help other families cope with their own youngsters' diagnoses, and raise funds in hopes of finding a cure, the Barneses established the DREAM Foundation Inc. – as in Duchenne Research Education And Miracles – in 1998 (dream-foundation.net).

Since then, they have raised more than \$1 million to fight the disease, and have contributed to the Department of Neurology at Ohio State University, where Dr. Jerry Mendell is conducting research (Mitchell is participating in clinical trials). The foundation also promotes education about the disease for pediatricians, and supports medical programs in this area.



MARY ALAN WOODWARD
Profile

"Dr. Mendell will be here in August to lead a symposium in neurology at the University of Louisville," Barnes said. "We hope that muscular dystrophy will be like polio, in that one day, a researcher will come up with the answer."

A small army of donors, many of them anonymous, has joined the fight.

"There are so many generous folks, such as Bill and Lindy Street, who got on board right away and helped bring in others," Barnes said. "We've gotten grants from Kosair Charities, the WHAS Crusade for Children and the Don Fightmaster Foundation. Brown & Williamson wrote a nice check before they left town."

Barnes' training and experience as a wealth management adviser came in handy as well, because a family foundation is often useful for philanthropic planning. His company has instituted a program called Special Steps, which helps families make wise estate plans not only for themselves, but also for their children who have special needs.

"Northwestern Mutual is doing this because it's the right thing to do, not because it generates sales – a lot of people with special-needs kids don't have much money," he said. "Special Steps helps them set up an estate plan that will take care of their loved ones. It has made me feel even better about having chosen estate-planning as my career."

As Mitchell's illness has proceeded, the youngster has grown accustomed to using a power chair to get around. However, enjoying visits to playgrounds has been a challenge.

"The main thing he has always wanted is to be able to play with his friends – to be included, not singled out," Barnes said. "Meredith and I started the 'Play Together' Playground Project, part of the DREAM Foundation, to make that possible for every youngster."

The foundation has formed a public-private partnership with the Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy and Louis-



ville Metro Parks to redesign metro playgrounds. Their efforts have led to accessibility improvements at four sites, including Des Pres Park in the East End. Construction of a new playground in Shawnee Park will begin this fall.

"Ultimately, what we want is to influence the design before a playground is built," Barnes said. "That's a lot cheaper than rehabbing it. We want to be advocates for good design from the ground up."

Renovation of the Iroquois Park playground was facilitated by Northwestern

Mutual's award of \$25,000 to Barnes through the company's "Most Exceptional Volunteer" recognition program.

"The goal of these playgrounds is to make them fun for everyone," Mitch said. "A child in a wheelchair can go through the water features just like anyone else, and get in and out of the bathrooms and parking lots without any problem. It's like when you go to Disney World or the Louisville Zoo – the accessibility features just blend in. Everybody's having fun. That's what Mitchell wants, and I believe it's what every child wants."

Q&A WITH MITCH BARNES

FAVORITE BOOK: The Bible. We're members of Southeast Christian Church.

FAVORITE MOVIE: "Facing the Giants."

HOBBY: I'm in the "old man's class," age 40 and up, in Fellowship of Christian Athletes Motocross. We have terrific camps every summer.

OBSESSION: My wife, Meredith, is first, followed by FCA Motocross.

PERSONAL HERO: I've got the coolest wife ever.

FINAL MEAL: Meredith's meatloaf, mashed

potatoes, green beans and pound cake. The meatloaf recipe was handed down by her mother and grandmother; it's a good consistency – not dry.

WHEN I WAS YOUNG, I WANTED TO GROW UP TO BE: in sales.

BEST THING ABOUT LOUISVILLE: It offers a little bit of everything. I wouldn't want to live anywhere else, even though I suffer from allergies.

FICTIONAL CHARACTER I IDENTIFY WITH: The coach in "Facing the Giants." He is determined to make a difference in people's lives through athletics and faith.