



The Other Bob Stoops

Think you know all about the Sooners' no-nonsense football coach?
Think again.

The patients at Children's Hospital see the softer side of Stoops.

BY JOHN HELSLEY PHOTOS BY KAY TANGNER

Kourtlyn Uzoma grew sick.

Just 13 years old, he was sick of being sick, sick of the battles with a wicked cancer, sick of the relapses and the two years trying to get well inside a hospital.

Then came word of a special camp—Kamp Kourtlyn—to be hosted by Bob Stoops and the Sooners at their practice field in Norman.

Just for him. And for a day, Kourtlyn wasn't sick anymore.

"He hung around with the football players, tossed the ball," said Kourtlyn's dad, Clement Uzoma. "Bob took him in his BMW, and they went around everywhere. It was just joyful to see Kourtlyn and his face and how he reacted when he got home."

Such an effect Stoops had on the little man.

"Bob Stoops," Clement said, "was God's angel sent to Kourtlyn."

While few know this personal side of Stoops, similar stories stream from the many who have either seen or experienced the Oklahoma football coach's continual outreach and acts of compassion for sick children. Publicly, it may be a hard and rugged persona that Stoops puts forth, but privately, particularly when in the company of kids in distress—which is often—he's gentle and soft.

"What's impressive, it's something he doesn't share with other people," said former Sooner Jacob Gutierrez, who became known for his own charitable acts while at OU. "It's not a publicity thing. It's him being who he is. He understands he can make an impact on other people's lives, and he takes the time to do that.

"It's not because he wants the attention, or it's someone making him, it's just because.

"And that's who coach Stoops is."

Bob Stoops: behind the scenes

Kay Tangner, a longtime volunteer at the Jimmy Everest Center for Cancer and Blood Disorders in Children, first invited Stoops and his players to a pep rally the young cancer patients wanted to throw to celebrate the Sooners' 2000 national championship.

Stoops accepted.

And he's been returning ever since.

More and more frequently over time.

In season. The off-season. Over the summer.

Sometimes Stoops arrives with players. Many times he slips in alone, unannounced.

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OPPOSITE PAGE: When Haylee Peters, a patient at the Jimmy Everest Center, dressed up as a nurse for Halloween, she knew just what to do. She asked University of Oklahoma head football coach Bob Stoops if she could listen to his heart with a borrowed stethoscope, and he agreed. "Yep," she confirmed to her good friend and frequent bedside visitor, "it's still beeping."



Little hands explore a trunk of Sooner treasures in Bob Stoops' office at the Gaylord Family/Oklahoma Memorial Stadium. Not only does the OU football coach make frequent visits to patients while they are in hospital, he often extends special invitations for them to visit him on the Norman campus where they get the VIP treatment and an insider's view at games and practices.

"We were in the hospital a lot last year," said Stacy Hasley, whose 7-year-old daughter Jordan is in remission from leukemia. "One morning, it was 8 o'clock, and there's this knock on the door. And the door opens, and it's him."

"It's just a very cool thing that he does."

Stoops has stopped in at the hospital with his own family on Thanksgiving mornings and also near Christmas.

When he can, he celebrates birthdays with the kids.

"Just hangs out," Tangner said. "Talks. Sits on the edge of the bed."

If anything, Stoops has avoided any attention when it comes to his time at the hospital and his fight for the cause.

Even his charity, the Bob Stoops Champions Foundation, aimed at helping ill or disadvantaged children, maintains a low profile.

Only recently, sensing that he could help enhance awareness of the need for critical bone marrow matches that many sick patients are awaiting, has Stoops peeled back the curtain.



Parents like Mark and Janna Walters appreciate the time Stoops gives so generously to their critically ill children. Micah Walters is one of the "biggest OU fans ever" and recurring trips to the hospital have not diminished his spirit. On good days Micah will call out "Boomer!" to the nurses and wait for the traditional "Sooner!" reply.

During the team's annual Media Day earlier [in August], Stoops welcomed reporters to a volunteer testing procedure to register potential donors with the National Marrow Donor Program.

Stoops was among 84 individuals, mostly players, who added their name to the registry.

"You have the opportunity to save somebody's life," Stoops said. "It's pretty neat when you think about it. I see a lot of kids at the Children's Hospital at OU Medical Center that are awaiting bone marrow transplants, or awaiting matches.

"Or I see a lot of them that have already had their match and had their transplant and are recovering from it. And I know the difference it makes in their lives."

Reaching out

Even kids focused on overcoming cancer know who Bob Stoops is.

Some, however, may not be such big fans—at first.

"Kids are so honest," Tangner said. "They'll say, 'I have to tell you, I don't like OU. I like OSU.'"

"And he'll say, 'Well, that's OK. Everybody's got to like somebody.' And by the end, it's not even about football. It's about a friend."

And friend is the word most associated with Stoops in his relationships with the kids and their families.

"Oh my goodness, each family thinks they're Bob Stoops' special patient," said Dr. Rene McNall, a pediatric oncologist at the hospital. "He has this amazing way to remember all their names.

"I can't tell you the number of patients and parents who are at the middle of this very stressful thing and they think Bob has this special place in his heart just for them.

"And he does. He just has a way of making them all feel special."

T.J. Hutchings was a promising 17-year-old high school pitcher with a baseball scholarship to the University of North Texas when persistent pain on his right hip led to an MRI. Doctors discovered a baseball-sized tumor and diagnosed him with Ewing's sarcoma, a cancer that most often strikes between the ages of 10 and 20.

They also found three spots on Hutchings' right lung.

"I was in the hospital," Hutchings said,



David Haywood is surrounded by the OU football team during a surprise party on his 13th birthday, which included a trip to football practice at Owen Field where Stoops led the Sooners in a chorus of "Happy Birthday."

"and Stoops came by and introduced himself, like I didn't already know him before."

A few months later, Hutchings' treatment ramped up—on his birthday no less—with radiation tacked on to chemotherapy.

"They told me to come down to the nurses station," Hutchings said. "They had all these balloons and stuff. I thought, 'Oh, that's nice: the nurses threw a party for me.'"

"I turned the corner, and Bob Stoops and Adrian Peterson were there. I was just baffled. They brought out the cake and everything. It was pretty awesome."

Hutchings' birthday was a Thursday, two days before the Red River Shootout with Texas in the Cotton Bowl.

"They were leaving out that Thursday afternoon to go to Texas," Hutchings said. "Adrian Peterson was on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* the week before. And he brought him up there.

"One of the biggest games of the year—always. I totally couldn't believe it."

Passing it on

That first pep rally evolved into an annual event around Christmas. Now the tradition involves sending the Sooners off to their bowl destination.

The children make banners and perform cheers. They present awards and "bowl rings"—candy ring pops and light-up rings—and even hand-made trophies. One year, there was an Orange Bowl trophy made with plastic fruit.

The players, they laugh and they howl.

And they connect, so much so that they end up coming back, too.

A list of OU players who have joined Stoops for room tours at Children's Hospital would be lengthy.

"I'd ride up there with Coach Stoops," Gutierrez said. "He knew each of the kids by name, and that really impressed me. He'd sit there and talk to them for a little while. And not just the kids, but the parents. It's a hard time for the parents, too.

"It was great to see that kind of a person and to play for that kind of a person. I'll always take that and know that no matter how busy you get or how famous you get, there's always time for other people."

Pass it on.

"The neat thing is watching him bring his players and teach them how to be a good person, too," McNall said.

"I always say I'm not a big football fan, but I'm a *huge* Bob Stoops fan because of all he does."

Building a connection

Tangner often shadows Stoops on his trips to Children's Hospital, shooting pictures to present to the patients and their families.

She keeps copies, too. And there are enough to fill several bulky photo albums, the images capturing the bond between Stoops and the children.

Forget, she said, that Stoops is a popular football coach. That may get their atten-



Stoops pushes David Haywood toward the goalposts where his cake is waiting during celebration in honor of the youngster's 13th birthday. Stoops often surprises patients with special guests like Adrian Peterson or Sam Bradford on their birthdays.

tion. But there must be something special to maintain it and create a connection.

"They can be in the dumps, because they're up there in the bone marrow unit, there for several weeks at a time," said Tangner, who has seen a lot in 15 years of serving at the hospital. "And he can walk in, and you can just see it. You can feel it.

"And the parents are just so grateful, because you'll do anything for your kid to just feel better."

Stoops might toss a football in one room, play dolls in another.

Mostly, he just talks. About stuff.

Kid stuff.

And, sometimes, he plays coach, too.

"That's what he tells the kids in the bone marrow clinic. He walks in, and he knows them all by name. 'You've got to keep up. You've got to stay strong. You've got to keep fighting.'"

McNall sees the struggles every day. She works on the front line, where disease wages an unfair war with kids. Disease too often wins.

Bob Stoops can't beat that. But he can provide reinforcement.

"Honestly, it gives them something positive to look forward to, to do," McNall said, "someone special who is special to a lot of people, who thinks of them as special.

"I had one kid who told me, 'Except for this cancer thing, this has been the best year of my life.'"

Making memories

The rooms and halls of Children's Hospital are filled with stories.

Some heart wrenching. Some uplifting. Stories of pain and suffering and sacrifice.

Of loss. And conquest.



Whenever Micah Walters checks into the Jimmy Everest Center, his OU football souvenirs—many signed by Bob Stoops—come along.

There are Sooner stories, too, involving Stoops and his players.

There's the tale of little Kaci McGee, who at the age of 4 would watch an entire OU football game just to see Stoops. And she referred to him as, "My Coach Stoops," which she'd repeat over and over as she followed him from room to room at the hospital.

There was the funeral for Justin Scott, a teenager who lost a battle with a bad form of leukemia, where no black clothing was allowed, only crimson and cream.

Where Stoops and several players served as pallbearers.

"It's not a little thing he does," McNall said.

Said Tangner: "I can't tell you how many times I go, and there's the football that he's signed, right by the casket. Or in the slide show, there he is with them. And how much it means to the families."

There was Stoops last December, sad that he would have to miss the annual pep rally because he was due to have shoulder surgery the same day. And there was Stoops, on the arm of his wife, Carol, showing up still groggy from the procedure.

"Who would have come straight from surgery?" Tangner said. "It had to mean something to him."

And what about Hutchings, now 21 and a junior at OU, beating cancer. Stoops still meets with him two or three times a semester, just to have lunch and check in.


"He gave me his cell phone number and told me to call if I ever needed anything," Hutchings said.

And there's Kourtlyn Uzoma, who died last spring.

When he was too sick to attend the Miami game he so wanted to see last fall, Kourtlyn was presented with a game ball, signed by all the seniors.

"That game ball is in my house," his father, Clement, said through tears, "and every day I see it. Bob Stoops came into our life, and I look at him as a Christian man, then secondly as a coach.

"My son for the last two years was in the hospital. Bob Stoops came every week to see him. I can remember when it got to the point Kourtlyn couldn't talk, they would bump hands.

"I don't know how to describe Bob Stoops except to say he's an angel. An angel God sent to visit all these kids." 

John Helsley is a staff writer at The Oklahoman in Oklahoma City. This article, one in a series marking Bob Stoops' 10th anniversary as head football coach at the University of Oklahoma, is reprinted by permission of The Oklahoma Publishing Company. Kay Tangner is a long-time volunteer at the Jimmy Everest Center.