

Spirit, hard work and generosity delivered by group of talented Bantams

The definition of teamwork

Louisa Taylor, The Ottawa Citizen
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The Ottawa Senators Triple-A Major Bantam hockey team in a locker room at the Bell Sensplex. The team has raised money to outfit a family with Christmas presents and food for the holidays.

OTTAWA - Gregg Kennedy likes to teach his young players a few things about life through hockey: get to the rink on time, make sure you have all your gear, take care of each other. Add to that a lesson his 13- and 14-year-olds will see up close this Christmas: Share your good fortune with others.

Kennedy, who works in sales, has been coaching minor hockey for more than 30 years. Right now he's coach of the Ottawa Senators Triple-A Major Bantam team, an élite group of players with a shot at playing at the highest levels of hockey.

At the beginning of the season, Kennedy divided the team into groups of four and gave each the task of coming up with a code of conduct. Then the whole team got together, shared their ideas and came up a set of rules and a system of fines for breaking those rules.

The result is that players have to keep five loonies in their bag at all times, to hand over to the captain if they break a rule. Forget your elbow pad? That's a loonie. Forget it again? Cough up a twoonie. Players decided they would have to pay for, among other things, being late, forgetting a mouth guard or not wearing a tie when the team is on the road. So far this season the players have paid roughly \$60 in fines - one player with mouthguard issues has apparently contributed more than one-third of the total.

"I asked them what they thought we should do with the money," says Kennedy. Being teenage boys, they thought laser tag and pizza sounded pretty great. Kennedy thought otherwise.

"Last week after practice we showed them a video about giving back, and told them we were going to help out a family that is struggling this Christmas," says Kennedy. "Kids playing at the league level tend to be from your high-income earners - it's an expensive endeavour. Through this we can impress upon them that there's a different kind of accountability besides getting your tie on and showing up to the rink on time."

Kennedy called the Ottawa Mission and asked if they knew someone who needed some help this holiday. The coach's only stipulation: His players needed to meet the person they were helping and deliver the gifts in person.

No problem, said the Mission. Although it primarily helps homeless men, the Mission also runs a job-training program for people on Ontario Works, teaching them food service skills in its large kitchen. One of the trainees, a 35-year-old mother of three, had confided to a program manager that it was going to be a bleak Christmas in her home.

Mery Cuadros, 35, and her husband Juan Orellana, 36, quit their dollar-store jobs earlier this year to get more education and training. Orellana is taking courses at Algonquin with an eye to joining the hospitality program, and Cuadros is pursuing her lifelong dream of being a cook. Scraping by primarily on Ontario Works, they were worried there'd be no money for presents this year for Eduardo, 11, Max, 3, and 20-month-old Ruby.

Kennedy asked each player's family for a \$20 contribution, which the families quickly exceeded. In their groups of four, the players were given a budget, the name, age and wishes of a Cuadros-Orellana family member, and sent out to shop.

"The most enjoyable part was watching them walking around shopping," said Kennedy. "They had good healthy debates over how to spend the money. One of them was commenting 'Holy cripes, things are expensive!' "

More donations came in, including a \$50 gift card from Walmart employees, a tune-up for the family car at Donnelly Ford, and a carload of groceries from a parent who doesn't want to be named. In fact, Kennedy and some of the parents weren't planning to publicize the effort at all - they were trying to teach the kids, not get them attention. But the Mission convinced them it was worth telling the story.

"I was apprehensive about the media side of it, but I think there's a plus there," said Kennedy. "I hope more people will pick up the baton and help out the Mission or any other charities. Then it's worth it."

The team delivered the gifts on Saturday and met Cuadros, Orellana and the children for the first time. Cuadros beams as she talks about the efforts of the hockey players, and the family's appreciation.

"You want the best for your kids and sometimes you just can't do it, so this is very nice," said Cuadros. "I am very excited, and I'm also curious to meet them, because I am trying to teach my son about responsibility and helping others, too."

Many of the players have contributed to Christmas hampers or toy drives before, but meeting the family brings the idea of helping out a little closer to home, says Costa Georgitsos, 14.

"It's nice to see how that money is going to people who need it," said Georgitsos, who says he has been fined only once - for forgetting his skates.

For his part, Kennedy is happy that the players and parents have been so enthusiastic, and that a family is getting a helping hand at Christmas while his players receive an important lesson.

"Rather than spend \$60 on pizza and go out and screw around, it seemed like the right thing to do."