



Gridiron Warriors aims to help more young paralysis victims

By Deborah Donovan | Daily Herald Staff

Published: 10/8/2009 12:01 AM

An organization inspired by Rob Komosa and the community outpouring of support after his devastating injury in football practice a decade ago will have a suburban kickoff next month.

The Gridiron Warriors Alliance, which provides emotional and spiritual support for severely injured high school football players, is developing ways to raise money as well, said Don Grossnickle, a Catholic deacon who has worked with Komosa for years.

A combination business and charity - it sells framed sports jerseys - so young men who suffer paralyzing injuries can have careers is one of the plans for the alliance. Samples will be unveiled at a Nov. 21 fundraiser at Harrys' in downtown Arlington Heights.

Both the Chicago Bears and Northwestern University football have been very generous, organizers said, but the group is asking players to donate memorabilia and hire the alliance to frame their personal jerseys.

Alliance members also want to align with Gridiron Greats Assistance Fund, the organization supported by former Bears coach Mike Ditka that helps National Football League veterans.

Ken Valdiserri, president of Gridiron Greats, said it is possible that some alliance can be worked out.

Eventually funding could be found through high school, college and professional sports organizations, said Steve Herbst of Palatine, who uses a wheelchair since his injury on the practice field almost 30 years ago at age 14.

Emotional support from people like Komosa and Herbst is very important, especially right after an accident, said Grossnickle, who is working with two young men from Robbins and Chicago.

But paralyzed football players often need financial support, too, for health care and adapted homes and vehicles.

"Our boys or men reach out and share their experience," said Grossnickle. "They can give advice about how to do fundraising and emotional and spiritual advice. Mothers to mothers can help each other with things like insurance and lawsuits."

Herbst said the work of the alliance is very important.

"Knowing what the families are going through and how life altering an event it is, it's really important to just be able to be there and reach out, to give them messages of hope and encouragement and ultimately to help them potentially raise some funds," he said.

Community support like he and Komosa received is also critical, said Herbst, but some communities might not have the resources.

Married with two children, Herbst is a business analyst manager for Allstate. His spinal injury was a little lower than some, which means he can breathe on his own and has enough use of his hands to operate a power wheelchair.

After the attention dies down, it costs an average of \$100,000 a year to care for someone who is paralyzed, said Grossnickle, and early death from infections or other complications are common.

"When the fund raisers have run their course, who's going to help them if we don't?"

The alliance's new Web site is gridironalliance.org.