

**SANDLOT SOCIETY FOCUSES ON FAMILIES, FUN, IMPROVING SKILLS**

## Sharing a passion for baseball



### Members to meet Mike Hargrove, Wife

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Published in The Akron Beacon Journal on Thursday, Mar 06, 2008

Jason Woodruff always has dreamed of returning to his youth, going back to the days of spending carefree afternoons playing baseball or Wiffle ball in the backyard with neighborhood friends and families.

The retired Marine and firefighter isn't just dreaming anymore. Instead, Woodruff, a 31-year-old University of Akron graduate, has turned his dreams into action by forming a group called the Sandlot Society.

"I didn't care much for school when I was a kid, but I loved playing baseball," Woodruff said. "And to play, I had to do well in school. I was one of those kids who, in the fall when everybody else got their footballs out, I still wanted to play baseball."

He still does, and Woodruff figures there are plenty of kids out there today who think the same way. Times have changed, though, and in many ways, so have society's values. Picking up a baseball and rounding up a group of friends to go out and play just isn't as easy, or safe, as in years past.



13-year-old Joey Rowland of Akron, a member of the group Sandlot Society, waits for a crack at the batting cage while participating in the annual University of Akron winter baseball camp at the university's Stile Athletic Field House on Sunday, Feb. 3, 2008

Woodruff, who works as a mechanical engineer at TLT-Babcock Inc., created a membership society that brings together baseball fans to have fun while improving playing and coaching skills.

The new group sponsors clinics and programs for people of all ages while reaffirming the importance of traditional family values.

"This is not a youth organization; it's for all ages," said Woodruff, founder and president of Sandlot Society. "It's a regular thing that kids and families can look forward to. It's a chance to meet other people and do things together they wouldn't normally get to do on their own."

About a year ago, Woodruff began putting regular thought to the idea.

"Having worked with WABL (West Akron Baseball League) the last few years, I saw how much better it could be — how much more could be offered to these kids and their families," he said. "After spending some time talking with people to see what kinds of things they enjoy and what other things they would like to do, something spoke to me and said, 'This would be a good idea.' "

Woodruff and childhood friend Mike Dies (they attended King, Litchfield and Firestone schools together) put specific ideas on paper for the Sandlot Society in November.

"We started going through what we could do with camps, going to Indians games and other ideas," Woodruff said. "One thing led to the next, and within two months, we had this big list of things to do."

### Getting members

Husband and wife Jerry and Consuela Williams were among the first to join the Sandlot Society, along with their three sons and a daughter.

"When Jason first told me about his vision of bringing out the best in people through baseball and family, I said, 'That's what it's all about,' " said Jerry Williams, an insurance agent whose family lives in Medina. "Emphasizing character and family and community values through sport certainly isn't a new concept. But Jason's got his heart in the right place and a good foundation on which to build."

Another Sandlot Society supporter, Augie Micozzi, signed up his 7-year-old son, Christopher, upon learning of the group's core values and its growing calendar of events that includes a town hall meeting with former Indians manager Mike Hargrove and his wife, Sharon, on Saturday at the John S. Knight Center.

"I knew Jason from WABL, and we stayed in contact," said Micozzi, who works for the Akron Police Department and coaches his son's Little League team. "We share a lot of the same values and philosophies. The Sandlot Society is a unique way to bring families together where baseball is just the platform, the mechanism. These kids are going to learn a lot and have fun while doing it."

### Group activities

The Sandlot Society had just wrapped up its first event last month — a four-week baseball skills camp taught by the University of Akron's baseball staff and players at the Stiles Field House — when a handful of wound-up kids surrounded Woodruff, asking what the group was going to do next.

"Well, what do you want to do?" Woodruff asked.

It was a simple question that garnered a genuine answer from one excited 11-year old.

"Can we go to the playoffs and World Series if the Indians go this year?"

Woodruff laughed. He then gave the kid a friendly pat on the head, ruffled his hair and said he would see what he could do — as long as the Tribe held up its end of the bargain.



University of Akron baseball player Doug McNulty talks baseball with members of the group Sandlot Society and other area kids during the annual University of Akron winter baseball camp at the university's Stile Athletic Field House on Sunday, Feb. 3, 2008

"I'm still such a kid at heart; I think that's why I connect so well with them," Woodruff said. "I've always been the overachiever, the one who wants to make a difference. I think I may have finally found the way to do it. This is my destiny; it is what I was put here to do."