



St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Joseph (Met.) football teams unite to promote early childhood literacy

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Caden Sternlieb likes to play football, which he does quite well as a lineman for the state-ranked St. Thomas Aquinas football team.

He also loves to read, which is something he was recently able to promote in a very meaningful way.

Sternlieb was part of a group of football players and cheerleaders from the Edison school who visited nearby St. John Vianney Elementary School in Colonia to read to young students.

“It was amazing,” he said. “The kids loved us, we loved the kids, and it was a really good thing. I like to read and I like to study, and it was great to show that to them.”

Likewise, a group of players from St. Joseph (Metuchen) read to youngsters from Saint James School in Woodbridge.

It was all part of a combined effort between football programs at the rival Middlesex County schools to use the recent game between two to promote early childhood literacy.

To make it happen, they teamed up with the Marisa Tufaro Foundation to not only visit the schools, but to collect monetary donations to purchase new children’s books for New Jersey’s Reach Out and Read Program.



Photo credit: Ed Pagliarini/Marisa Tufaro Foundation



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October is also National Book Month, and the cause was a natural one.

The Marisa Tufaro Foundation was created by Greg Tufaro, a long-time sports writer in Middlesex County, and his wife Cyndi, an elementary school principal in Edison, after the death of their daughter, Marisa, at age 13 in 2017. Marisa had an indomitable spirit despite suffering from severe health issues throughout her life. She endured six open-heart surgeries before receiving a transplant. Unfortunately, a complication after that surgery resulted in a rare form of cancer which led to her death.

Greg and Cyndi created the foundation to honor her memory, and fundraising campaigns, many centered around high school sports, have helped raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for causes and scholarships benefitting local youths.



Photo credit: Ed Pagliarini/Marisa Tufaro Foundation

A central theme to each effort is how they connect to things which were important to Marisa. And having been hospitalized for more than two years and spending so much additional time convalescing, reading - both alone and with her parents - was a very essential part of her life.

“This fundraiser had special meaning because of the profound impact reading had on Marisa and the role books played in her life,” Greg said. “Despite being hospitalized for more than two years and maintaining hundreds of doctors’ appointments, Marisa was an Edison Township Public Schools honor roll student, a testament to outstanding and dedicated educators. While Marisa was an infant and toddler, my wife and I read daily to her at home or in the hospital. She developed an affinity for reading and a foundation for success in school, which along with the parent-child bonding experience is a paramount component of the Reach Out and Read program.”

It just so happened that St. Joseph coach Bill Tracy was looking to engage his team in a community service project. He reached out to Tufaro, who is also a 1985 graduate of the school.

“Our nonprofit has benefited immensely from incredible support from Greater Middlesex Conference member schools including St. Joseph and St. Thomas Aquinas,” Tufaro said. “Over the summer, Coach Tracy expressed a desire to partner on a community service project and fundraiser for Marisa’s foundation. We agreed that Reach Out and Read would be a wonderful cause.”

“We are humbled to be a part of honoring the memory of Marisa Tufaro and assisting the Reach Out and Read program,” Tracy said. “This program is a great endeavor to promote childhood literacy and bring families closer together.”

Not only was it just the type of project he was looking for, Tracy also brought the idea to Tarig Holman, the coach at St. Thomas Aquinas. He wholeheartedly agreed to involve his team as well.

“Coach Tracy is a special dude and a really, really good person,” Holman said. “When you talk about the program that he’s building, and what we’re trying to do over at St. Thomas, it’s great to come together for a cause. At the end of the day, it’s a really a lot bigger than football and what happens out here on the gridiron. Football changed my life, and we want to teach our kids to use it as a platform to show true character.”

“It’s amazing that these two programs, which were both state ranked at the time of their meeting and are separated by a mere two-mile stretch of Plainfield Avenue, would use their big game as a platform to heighten awareness about the importance of early childhood literacy,” noted Tufaro.

St. Thomas Aquinas won the game, 34-20, but both teams benefitted from the overall experience, which extended to other students as well. The St. Thomas Aquinas players were also accompanied by members of the cheerleading squad.



Photo credit: Ed Pagliarini/Marisa Tufaro Foundation

“The kids were great, and they were excited and listened,” said St. Thomas cheerleader Andrea Asare, who read to a group of kindergartners. “They were very engaged and had a lot of fun. It’s all really important because a lot of kids are having trouble with their reading comprehension, even in older grades with reading and expressing their ideas. So it’s important to get kids to get excited about reading at a young age. I like to read, and it was great to pass that along to them.”

Sternlieb felt the same way.

“The kids were having fun, and it was important to represent our school as students as well as athletes. This was also a really great cause for us to express that. I felt we did something really good by spending time with those kids.”

The St. Joseph group included receiver Anton Irving.

“We have a special connection on and off the field,” Irving said. “On the field, we are doing great this season, and off the field, we love doing things like this to help the community.”

Those interactions are what made this endeavor different from most other fundraising and awareness games which take place for other outstanding causes throughout the state.

“The players and cheerleaders took their responsibility seriously,” Tufaro said. “They were well prepared. They familiarized themselves ahead of time with the picture books to ensure they would know how to deliver the stories in a fun and creative way. During the classroom visits, the elementary schoolers fed off their energy and enthusiasm. The high school student-athletes seemed to enjoy the experience of reading aloud even more than their engaged young audience. The interactions were wonderful to see.”



Photo credit: Ed Pagliarini/Marisa Tufaro Foundation



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