



STAY IN SOFTBALL

Nonprofit helps those in need with expenses associated with playing the sport

By Ashley Scoby

When softball player Meghan McKeogh was still in middle school, her mother donated a kidney.

The act of selflessness inspired McKeogh in the obvious ways — “I’m still in awe of her,” she said. But what she didn’t realize at the time was the domino effect that surgery would create and how it would lead to McKeogh starting her own nonprofit as a teenager.

As McKeogh’s mom was recovering, McKeogh was still trying to go on with her normal, day-to-day life. She still had to get to practice, eat before games and buy equipment. The seemingly simple pieces of a middle schooler’s schedule suddenly got way more complicated, when McKeogh’s mother was still in bed after a major surgery.

That’s when McKeogh’s softball community came together to help.

“They would offer rides, cook meals, come over if we needed anything,” she said. “There was no end to the offers to do the simplest things to help out. That’s really where I got the idea rolling.”

The idea, it turned out, was an organization dedicated to helping youth and high school softball players in similar situations. Whether it was a player going through a family emergency, one who couldn’t afford pay-to-play fees, or someone going through a health crisis — McKeogh recognized there was a serious need. Softball is an expensive sport, and she didn’t want any player to miss out on the opportunity to play because they couldn’t afford, or didn’t have the logistical support, to participate.

So McKeogh took that idea and ran with it. Still

in middle school, she decided she wanted to start a nonprofit that would work to close some of those gaps she’d experienced in her own life: What happens when a player can’t get a ride to practice or isn’t able to afford a new bat because of family medical bills?

Her mother was a lawyer and — after recovering from her kidney donation — helped set up all the legal framework of the organization, which would be called Stay in Softball. The goal was clear: sweep away barriers players might experience that could otherwise potentially lead to them quitting the game.

It started small. McKeogh and a few teammates in Ohio organized a bat raffle for a local player whose mother was going through chemotherapy. They realized then that equipment drives were where they could likely have the most impact.

“It’s a lot,” said Maddi Long, who started

(Above) Emily Darlington with equipment donated to Stay in Softball.

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volunteering with McKeogh as a teenager on the player advisory board, and currently plays for UT Martin. “I’m a catcher, so I used to go to catching classes too, so there were a lot of expenses. It’s easily \$500 for equipment alone, then there are fees for travel teams. It’s nice to just give to other people so they have the same opportunity.”

As a sport with so many equipment needs (regardless of position), softball can see a decline in participation from those without as many resources.

“It’s crazy to see how driven families are to keep their girls in the sport,” McKeogh said. “In my personal experience I’ve known people who had to not continue the sport because it got out of reach financially.”

She, and the rest of the Stay in Softball volunteers, recognized that the sport is only made better by more girls being able to participate.

At first, they thought most of their impact would come by helping players who were going through a short-term emergency. They would be the patchwork solution that could help them stay in the sport, even if they were going through something tough in their personal or family lives.

But McKeogh soon realized their reach could go even further.

“Stay in Softball was really started with the idea of helping girls going through a family emergency, but from there, we kind of started hearing questions, like, ‘What about this?’” she said. “What about travel difficulties or funding difficulties?” It kind of branched out to a case-by-case basis, and so really since then, it’s been the softball community doing what it’s always done, and that’s help those in the softball family.”

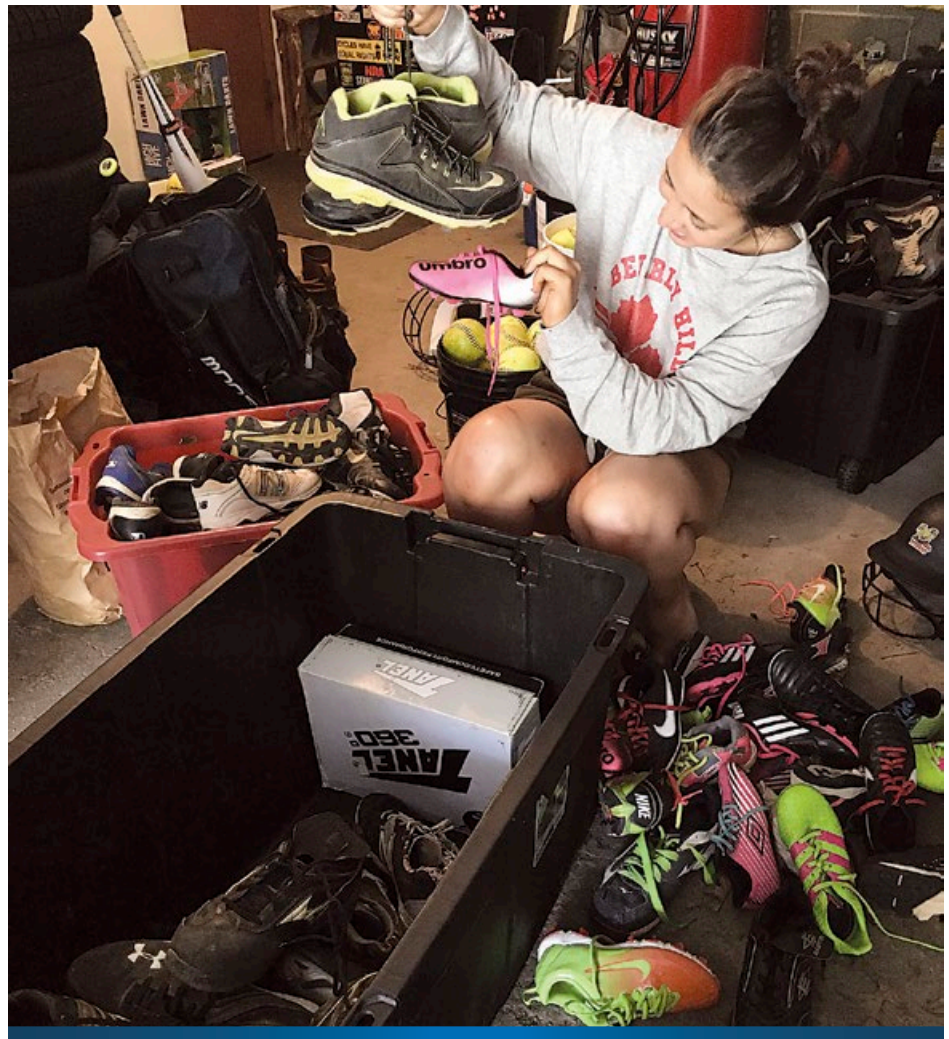
In the seven years since McKeogh first started Stay in Softball, the organization’s services have expanded, and they’ve helped an estimated 2,000 players.

There’s a player assistance program for those who need help with equipment or travel costs. There’s a program to help entire teams, too — for example, sending equipment to a high school in North Carolina that had to replace equipment lost after Hurricane Florence.

They also launched a slate of free clinics (both for players learning new skills and for coaches).

Players in need (or those who know someone in need) can fill out a form on Stay in Softball’s website or reach out to the organization by phone or through social media to request assistance.

While those involved have expanded their ways



Meghan McKeogh started Stay in Softball when she was in middle school.

of helping, their bread and butter is still donating equipment.

The organization has several drop-off sites throughout Ohio, and they’ve even shipped donations outside of the state. And while the original, local player advisory board — who started as teenagers — are now college-aged and playing in various spots across the country, they still come back to run equipment drives when they can. Many set up at local tournaments throughout the summer, for example, and Stay in Softball provides a tent and signage for volunteers to use.

“Everyone always needs something new and always something people could use,” said Notre Dame College outfielder McKenzie Anderson, who serves on the advisory board. “As a college softball

player, I see how we’re constantly going through balls. It’s insane how many buckets of balls we go through. So that’s my main goal over the summer, to email other collegiate teams and see if they have anything they want to donate and try to work at any of the clinics we do.”

The hope is for the original advisory board to eventually cede leadership of the organization to up-and-coming junior advisory board members.

McKeogh, for example, is at Hillsdale College now — although a rough bout with COVID last year during her sophomore season forced her to step away from the game. But she says she’s still committed to the organization’s original ethos, because she knows how important the game can be for young girls.

Although the bulk of the organization’s impact

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The nonprofit Stay in Softball puts on free clinics in addition to player and team assistance programs.

has been in Ohio, where McKeogh and her teammates played in high school, she hopes to expand the mission nationwide. The need, she says, is everywhere, not just in her home state.

"I would really like to see us expanding physically in more states," she said. "I'd like to get more people on the ground in more states. It's really hard and expensive to ship equipment out of state and to pay for storage. We've definitely made an impact name-wise in Ohio, people know who we are and how to contact us. I just feel like a lot of people in other states don't know about us, and I would love for players there to have the same opportunities to receive help."

"I want to see it do big things," Long said of Stay in Softball's future. "We want as many people involved as possible because we want to see the next

generation keep going on with it."

That changing of the guard of sorts is set to happen soon. Anderson and Long are both in their sophomore seasons, and McKeogh is one year older. And they hope to still stay involved: McKeogh started the organization and says it will always be a focus of hers. Anderson said she wants to be a teacher and softball coach in the Cleveland area when she graduates and still hopes to be involved at that point. Still, they hope to pass the torch on to younger players who understand the organization's purpose and want to help out just as much.

The need is still there: Softball is still an expensive sport, and there are still hundreds, if not thousands, of players nationwide who struggle with the cost of playing.

But as McKeogh experienced firsthand when her mother had surgery, the sport also has a way of coming together for its own — and she hopes the organization she started will play an even bigger role in that sense of community.

"Stay in Softball is the best side of the softball community, and that's what we're trying to live up to," McKeogh said. "It is a huge family, not in the sense of everybody knows everyone all the time ... but anything you need, people will take care of you. That's really the driving force behind this."

Ashley Scoby is a 2015 graduate from the University of Kentucky. Her work has appeared in The Seattle Times, the Lexington (Kentucky) Herald Leader, CBSDetroit.com, The Kansas City Star and espnW.com.