

Pacers coach does more than lend his name to cause Jim O'Brien takes to streets to combat homelessness

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It's two weeks before the June 25 National Basketball Association draft, and Indiana Pacers head coach Jim O'Brien is leaving the house early.

But the third-year Pacers coach isn't off to watch video, conduct player tryouts, or meet with scouts in preparation for the upcoming draft. That will have to wait.

Instead, O'Brien is off to a 7 a.m. meeting with Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention Executive Director

Indiana Pacers Head Coach Jim O'Brien, front left, served meals to needy and homeless people at Thanksgiving dinner at Conseco Fieldhouse last November.

Timothy Joyce and some of the local notfor-profit's board members.

"This is a busy time of year," said O'Brien, looking around his subterranean Conseco Fieldhouse office cluttered with three video monitors, stacks of player videotapes, and mounds of draft prospect notes. "Lots of long days."

But O'Brien, who himself became a CHIP board member shortly after arriving in town in 2007, said he always makes time for his chosen charity work. The lifelong coach, who has a daughter with Down's Syndrome, is also an advocate and volunteer for organizations serving people with special needs.

Like former Indianapolis Colts Coach Tony Dungy, O'Brien has eschewed commercial opportunities, instead devoting himself to coaching and charity work.

"I'm not saying I've had a lot of commercial opportunities; it's not like that for NBA coaches the way it is for NFL coaches," O'Brien said. "But I'd rather devote my time to the causes that mean the most to me, and hopefully where I can be the greatest service to my community."

Next on O'Brien's charity to-do list is his involvement in CHIP's annual July count of the city's homeless—a kind of census that helps determine what city services and resources are needed. O'Brien and his wife plan to be in the trenches helping with the head count. Then there's the Sept. 16 Blueprint Celebration, a fundraiser and event to recognize local residents who help the homeless.

O'Brien began devoting time to homeless initiatives while coaching the Philadelphia 76ers in 2004. O'Brien, one of eight children raised in a devout Catholic home, met Sister Mary Scullion, co-founder of nationally renowned Project Home, a Philadelphia-based not-for-profit devoted to serving chronically homeless and low-income individuals.

O'Brien, whose two aunts are missionary nuns—one in India, the other in Peru—understands the importance of community service, said Pacers President Jim Morris.

"We're challenged as Christians to be aware of the most needy," O'Brien said. "That's the way I was brought up, and meeting with Sister Mary strengthened my desire to reach out to this segment of the population."

O'Brien met with then-mayor Bart Peterson shortly after being hired by the Pacers, and mentioned his work

with homeless initiatives in Philadelphia.

“The next thing I know, I’ve got a pamphlet for CHIP showing up in my office,” O’Brien said with a broad smile.

When Joyce, the CHIP executive director, was told of O’Brien’s willingness to help, he wasn’t sure what to think.

“There are celebrities who will lend their name to causes and there are those who simply write checks, and we’re appreciative of that,” Joyce said. “But I had no idea the extent to which Coach O’Brien would become a part of this organization.”

O’Brien attends fund-raisers, gives motivational speeches to CHIP board members and volunteers, and works in homeless shelters and soup kitchens alongside his wife, Sharon.

“That level of commitment from someone of his profile is pretty rare,” Joyce said.

O’Brien’s impact on the 13-year-old organization is sizable, Joyce said. He recalled a day last March when O’Brien showed up the morning of a Pacers game to talk to 636 volunteers.

The assist from the basketball coach is coming at the right time. According to CHIP research, there are more than 75 percent more homeless families counted in central Indiana this year than last year.

“Sitting here, it sounds like we’re talking about a third-world country, doesn’t it?” O’Brien said from inside the Fieldhouse. “Yet you can go two blocks in any direction from here and see it. We can’t allow it to continue.” •