

## **Pacers' O'Brien takes steps to fight homelessness**

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Indianapolis Star, Mike Wells

Indiana Pacers coach Jim O'Brien learned about helping the less fortunate at a young age.

While growing up in Philadelphia, O'Brien's parents would bring home an occasional homeless person and provide them with a warm meal.

Now, more than 40 years later, O'Brien is reaching out to help Indianapolis' homeless.

The Pacers coach spent a night walking the city's streets earlier this summer, counting the homeless as part of the Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention (CHIP) program.

O'Brien and his wife, Sharon, will be presenting sponsors tonight for CHIP's annual celebration to recognize individuals and organizations making progress in helping end homelessness.

"It is very, very difficult knowing that we could go a mile in any direction and see people living under bridges and people living in their cars," O'Brien said. "It's something that we as people cannot stand around and think that all these homeless people are the norm. We have to do something no matter how small it is to try to get as many people off the street as possible."

CHIP started in 1996, and a 10-year "Blueprint to End Homelessness" was implemented in 2002.

"We're engaged in a number of things that specifically help families and individuals come out of shelters and off the streets," CHIP executive director Tim Joyce said. "We want to help them move into a place where they can put their heads down at night on their own pillow, in their own room and in their own home."

O'Brien took part in a similar program when he was coach of the Philadelphia 76ers.

O'Brien met with former Indianapolis mayor Bart Peterson about taking part in the program shortly after being named coach of the Pacers in 2007.

"The O'Briens don't do this for the purpose of having their name on something," Joyce said. "Just as he is as a coach, Jim is motivated to do this well and do it right and make a difference. He's real and he really does want to help make our community a better place, and I'm not sure that's always the way it is."

The O'Briens see homeless people since they live Downtown. Some have even stopped O'Brien on the street to give him coaching tips.

"Even the homeless think they can coach," O'Brien said, laughing. "They were telling me moves we should have made, but it was all in good nature. I think the many, many people on the streets really appreciate the things people do in outreach services."

O'Brien was part of a group that walked the streets until 2 a.m. in late July. The goal was to count the number of homeless people. Officials were trying to determine if the total is higher in the summer than in late January when the count is typically conducted.

While the numbers are still being tallied, Joyce said he believes the final count will be close to 1,500, the number the group reported in January.

"It was an eye-opening experience," O'Brien said. "There had to be about 30 people living under this one particular bridge and they formed little communities. They are sleeping on top of cardboard boxes with quilts over them or in sleeping bags, with their possessions closely guarded.

"We visited two guys and these guys kept their camp like a house. There was a great deal of pride in the way they kept their camp. This is something that Sharon and I will be involved in the rest of our lives one way or another."