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Businessman teaches soccer players that College is Real

By Robert Jordan
Valley Times

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DANVILLE

It was supposed to be a small gift to the Richmond High School soccer program, but Brad Blake's gesture has turned into much more.

Blake, the CEO and co-founder of a private commercial real estate development and services company in Danville, turned a \$2,000 contribution for soccer equipment into a program that is giving Richmond soccer players a chance to make it to college.

Blake was spurred into action that is changing lives by a tremendous show of sportsmanship by Richmond High players in 2005: Favored to win their first title since 1994, the team was beaten 2-1 in a playoff against ninth-seeded Monte Vista. The losing Richmond boys team and their fans gave the Danville winners a rousing standing ovation, which touched Blake.

Using the stamina and push to win that has made him a success in business, friends and associates say Blake is creating small miracles.

As a girls soccer coach in Danville in 2005, Blake and other parents chose to donate the money normally used for end-of-the-year coach gifts to a fellow soccer program. When deciding where to donate, Blake remembered the sportsmanship

gesture and suggested the Richmond High girls program.

Three months after that playoff, Blake took the check to a West Contra Costa County school board meeting. He was there to present the gift, but found himself in the middle of a raucous meeting loaded with angry parents upset about redistricting.

By the time he was done with his presentation, Blake had the disillusioned crowd on its feet and clapping.

"I saw that night, from the reaction and response that we got, how much a little amount of commitment and contribution could really make," Blake said. "And that night, I started talking to the boys soccer coach, and we started talking, and I said this inspired me to do more."

The end result was Blake's 2005 start of the College is Real program, a nonprofit designed to help Richmond High boys and girls soccer players realize that college is a possibility.

College is Real rekindled in Blake his days at Stanford University when he ran an NCAA-sponsored program, Volunteers for Youth. Designed like Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, that program catered to the youth in Palo Alto.

It was a natural fit for Blake, who became the Volunteers for Youth's director during his senior year.

Blake loves sports, and has played just about every one of them. So much so that he said his friends joke that his real major at Stanford wasn't political science but intramural sports.

In high school, he played baseball, tennis and basketball for San Ramon Valley High. When he

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wasn't playing sports, he was coaching a Little League Baseball team and a Catholic Youth Organization basketball team.

"Most people want to make a difference in this world in their life," said Jerry Hunt, Blake's business partner. "A lot of people talk about it and there are a lot who come with ideas. But there are very few who take ideas to action and know how to make it happen.

Blake is always going. That's the way he does business, and the way he has pushed College Is Real.

It's not uncommon for Blake to send Daniel Ponce, the College is Real program director at Richmond High, one to 15 e-mails a day to check on the program.

In fact, the best way to get in touch of Blake is on his BlackBerry. It's news that Ponce found out when Blake bought Ponce his own BlackBerry to keep in touch.

"Communication is very important to Brad," Ponce said. "He always wants information fast and accurate because that is the way it is in the business setting. Things flow."

In its third year of existence, Blake and Ponce have the College is Real program flowing.

The program had its first graduating class last year, sending nine students to college, including seven to four-year universities.

The program requires that participants have at some point in high school been a part of the soccer program. Players must have a 2.75 GPA upon selection to the program, and then must raise it to 3.0 after two semesters in the program.

They are also required to attend weekly tutoring sessions and maintain a certain GPA. For their participation, they are rewarded with college help from Ponce at least three days a week. This includes college tours, guest speakers, help with college applications, college preparation, scholarships and a professional mentor.

Parent outreach and commitment programs help get whole families involved in the students' success.

"Initially, I was like, 'Why is (Brad) here? Is there something behind it?'" said Ponce, a 2001 Richmond High graduate and mentee of Blake's.

"After getting to know him, I found out he is a great guy.

"Not everyone would do what he is doing. He is helping students in a community that he has never been a part of."

The only time Blake had ever spent any time in Richmond was as a high school student in the mid-1970s, when San Ramon Valley played Richmond or Harry Ells High in basketball.

Now, Blake visits Richmond at least three times a month. He does that while juggling his personal life and a company that owns commercial real estate properties around the East Bay.

"You don't see a lot of people like (Brad) go to a low-income school and start a program like this," said Jimmy Mercado, a freshman at UC Berkeley and part of the first College is Real class. "One of Brad's main goals is to (make sure you) follow your dream and keep your goals."

This year, 35 players are in the program and another 15 freshmen are expected once the season starts today. And it's not just the ones who graduate

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who are showing progress. After a grade check last week, several of the players had 4.0 GPAs.

"I was going through the grades and the kids in CIR (College is Real) have really, really good grades," said the Richmond boys soccer coach, Rene Siles. "After three or four years it's really starting to work."

"We have four starting seniors that are going to go to four-year schools and they are all in CIR and that is the first time that has happened."

It is that type of progress that Blake is banking on to continue in the program.

"The goal is for kids to get into college and succeed in college and then come back and contribute," Blake said. "The hope is that it becomes self-sustaining."

Reach Robert Jordan at 925-847-2184 or rjordan@bayareanewsgroup.com .

BIOGRAPHY NAME: Brad Blake **AGE:** 50
RESIDENCE: Alamo **OCCUPATION:** Co-founder and CEO of Blake Hunt Ventures, a private commercial real estate development and services company; founder of College is Real, a nonprofit helping Richmond High School soccer players realize their college dreams
QUOTE: "Always strive for excellence and do what you say you are going to do." details:

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