



PHOTO/LINDA LYNWANDER

Allendale resident 'Mighty' Mike Simmel runs "The Bounce Out the Stigma Project" basketball camp, which is for children and teens with functional developmental issues. Simmel is a member of the Harlem Wizards basketball team and was diagnosed with epilepsy when he was 2 years old.

ALLENDALE

'Mighty' Mike has mighty heart

BY LINDA LYNWANDER
FOR TOWN JOURNAL

'Mighty' Mike Simmel, who ran "The Bounce Out the Stigma Project" basketball camp at Ho-Ho-Kus Public School earlier this month, admits he doesn't look very "mighty."

In fact, when he auditioned for the Harlem Wizards basketball team in 2001, the coaches remarked that the Allendale man, now 30 years old, had to be crazy.

"Here I am, 5 feet, 8 inches on a good day, a little white guy," Simmel said. "It really made them laugh."

But after seeing Simmel's audition tape and watching him entertain campers at a Wizards basketball camp, the management changed their minds. Soon a contract was on the table, and ever since, Simmel has been an integral member of a 15-man team that travels from coast to coast and

internationally putting on exhibitions and playing community groups for charity.

He can dribble four balls at one time, manipulate the ball from one arm to another, around his back, spin it on his fingers and juggle.

"I'm really deceptive," Simmel admits. "I look like someone who should be working at The Gap."

However, even more unique is Simmel's connection to people with special needs. He himself has had epilepsy since he was 2 years old. Because he couldn't do such things as hop on one leg and tie his shoes, his father decided basketball would help his motor skills. It worked.

Soon, the youngster was dribbling all the time, when he got up in the morning, when he walked the dog and when he got to the school gym, which he often snuck into if it was locked. He played point guard for Don Bosco Preparatory High School in Ram-

sey and at SUNY Purchase. But he couldn't really make it in the pros, being so slight of build.

"I was 16 and I had a seizure at a basketball camp," Simmel remembered. "They wanted me to leave. That's when I vowed that kids wouldn't be as isolated as I felt, if I had anything to say about it."

During college, Simmel was a ball boy for the Knicks. He met Mark Jackson, Latrell Sprewell and Allan Houston. After college, Simmel decided to draw on his life experience to help kids out. Three years ago, he opened the "Bounce Out the Stigma" camp, which was set up for children and teens ages 9 to 18 with functional developmental issues, including ADD, ADHD, epilepsy, diabetes, learning issues, motor skills issues, confidence issues, etc.

The ratio of camper to staff is 4:1, and the counselors all play basketball.

HO-HO-KUS

Special campers gain confidence playing basketball

BY LINDA LYNWANDER
FOR TOWN JOURNAL

There must have been something pretty special happening at Ho-Ho-Kus Public School last month to get Chris's mother to drive him back and forth from Long Island for five days.

"These are kids that don't get to do a lot in school," Chris's mother said.

Her teen son, who has epilepsy, attended the non-profit "The Bounce Out the Stigma Project" basketball camp, run by Allendale resident 'Mighty' Mike Simmel from Aug. 11 to 15. The camp, set up for children and teens ages 9 to 18 with functional developmental issues (ADD, ADHD, epilepsy, diabetes, learning issues, motor skills issues, confidence issues, etc.), has been operating for three years, and Ho-Ho-Kus was one of three locations this summer.

"I know he's safe here and that's a big relief," Chris's mom said.

"When you have a child with epilepsy, you always have to be on, because you never know when they'll have a seizure."

Simmel — a member of the Harlem Wizards basketball team and a nationwide spokesman for the Epilepsy Foundation — has epilepsy himself, and therefore has a special affinity for kids who want to play sports but don't have the motor skills.

Near the end of one of the camp days, which ran from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., the campers finished up dribbling and practicing their lay-ups with Mighty Mike and visitor Raphael Addison, a former Nets player. Before beginning a half-court game to practice their skills, campers gathered around Addison, shooting questions at him. The kids wanted to know if he'd played with the Celtics (yes), if he could slam dunk (sure), has he played with Michael Jordan (yes). And they all wanted his autograph.

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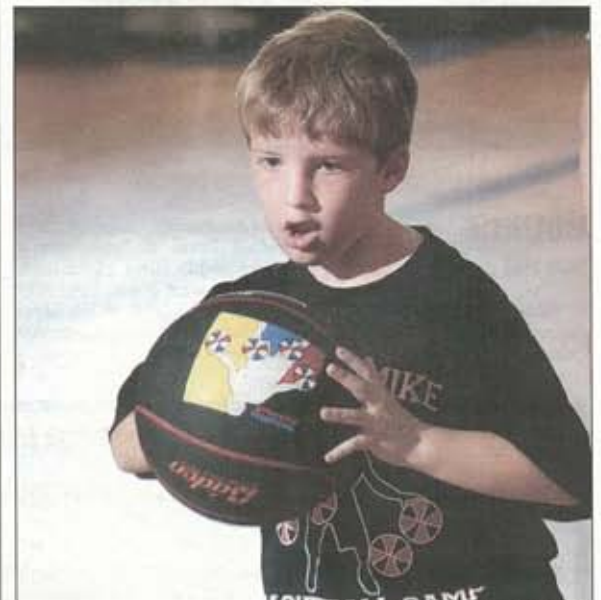


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A camper throwing a perfect pass in a station exercise at 'Mighty' Mike's basketball camp, which was held at Ho-Ho-Kus Public School last month.



At left, a camper dribbling a basketball in front of his counselor, Andrew Ling, a student at Northern Highlands Regional High School. At right, a camper is assisted by 'Mighty' Mike. Below, 'Mighty Mike' taking a break with his campers as they dribble during morning exercises.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF NEWSPHOTO.COM

Did you know that Allendale resident 'Mighty' Mike...

- ...is 5 feet, 8 inches tall.
- ...is a member of the Harlem Wizards basketball team.
- ...played point guard at Don Bosco Preparatory High School in Ramsey.
- ...was diagnosed with epilepsy at 2 years old.
- ...is a nationwide spokesman for the Epilepsy Foundation.
- ...performs during NBA halftime shows.
- ...was honored last year at Yankee Stadium for his work with the special needs community in front of 55,000 fans.

BOUNCE

FROM PAGE 3

"Now I'll ask you a question," the pro said. "Where did the L.A. Lakers get their name?"

Immediately, another teen named Chris, 17, who lives in Upper Saddle River, explained to the group that it was from Minneapolis, the land of the lakes. That earned the shy youngster several high fives.

In the bleachers, Chris's mom explained her son had been born premature, weighing just 1 pound, 9 ounces, and was 12 inches at birth. He attends a special education school in Emerson, but is a whiz when it comes

to basketball trivia.

One of the camp counselors, Andrew Ling, who just graduated from Northern Highlands Regional High School where he was a guard and a forward on the school's basketball team, said he

himself has ADHD, so he can empathize with kids who have trouble playing basketball.

"Some kids can't reach the rim, so this camp gives them three or four or more chances," Ling said. "If the camp had been around 10 years ago, I'd have been a regular. [At the beginning of camp], there'll be a kid who'd get so emotional if he'd miss a shot, and now he can make five or six in a minute. They're so happy to be here among people who understand them, who make allowances for them. Some kids, by the end, you can't look at them without a smile breaking out on your face."

Most of the children will have made new friends, as have their parents, many of whom have been hanging out in the stands with each other.

"There are a lot of camps out there they've gone to, but this is the one they always talk about," said Ho-Ho-Kus resident, Beth, about her two sons Liam and Hayden.

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