

## THE MORNING READ

**DOUBLE TEAM**

*Two Aliso Niguel basketball players start Socks From Jocks, a charity that will keep giving long after they graduate.*

By LOU PONSI THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Aliso Niguel boys basketball coach Keith Barnett is impassioned, but not only about building winners on the court.

Each year, Barnett tells his players in their first team meeting that they have responsibilities outside of basketball.

"As a coach of a high school program, I think it is important to be well-rounded," said Barnett, a social studies teacher at Aliso Niguel and the father of five. "That includes being a good student, a good son and giving back to the community."

Giving back isn't optional. It is as important to Barnett as running the proper fast break.

When he met with his players before the 2004-05 season, he had no idea how well his message would be heard.

As freshman players, Harry Meussner and Conner Crabtree were sparked by Barnett's credo.

Meussner, tenacious, driven and mature beyond his years, and Crabtree, determined and self-disciplined, did more with Barnett's words than any players he has coached.

The boys are seniors now and their service to others has stretched not only through their south Orange County community, but halfway around the world.

**A FAST BREAK**

Barnett took the reins of the Aliso Niguel basketball team at the start of the 2003-04 season and directed his Wolverines to volunteer for a beach cleanup. That worked well enough, but Barnett was looking for something bigger.

Before the 2004-05 season, the Wolverines collected used coats from their families, friends and neighbors. Meussner and Crabtree, then freshmen, were among a group of about 60 players who collected a total of about 400 coats. The garments were donated to the Orange County Rescue Mission.

When Meussner and Crabtree delivered the coats to the mission, Meussner asked the attendant if other items were needed.

The word that came back would become part of their logo, their future.

Socks.

The boys were told that on a rainy day, a single shelter distributes close to 300 pairs of socks.

"I thought to myself, that would be an easy thing to get people to donate," Meussner recalls. "We could add that next year."

From the end of their freshman year to the start of their sophomore year, Crabtree, Meussner and their mothers, Tracy Browne and Jane Meussner, spent hours cultivating the project.

They even came up with a name: "Socks From Jocks."

"It was simple, and it rhymed," Crabtree said.

At the start of 2005-06 the boys presented their Socks From Jocks idea to Barnett, who loved it. He made them promise to involve the whole team.

In that first year, the Socks From Jocks volunteers collected 631 coats, 279 pairs of socks, 222 toothbrushes, 129 tubes of toothpaste, 187 combs, 135 deodorants and 36 bars of soap.

Meussner's younger brother, Jimmy, then 12, was inspired too. On Halloween, Jimmy trick-or-treated for toothbrushes at dentists' offices. The youngster bagged 316 toothbrushes.

Socks From Jocks also held a drive to raise funds for the American Red Cross Disaster Relief Fund for Hurricane Katrina victims and raised \$1,200.

That was just the beginning.

Crabtree and Meussner persuaded other sports teams to join the effort. By the 2006-07 school year, Aliso Niguel's boys basketball, girls volleyball, girls basketball, golf and baseball teams were holding drives under the umbrella of Socks From Jocks, as were two local National Junior Basketball chapters, a 5on5 league and two middle schools.

"It got so big so fast," Harry's mother said.

Meussner's and Browne's garages have become warehouses in which items are sorted and bagged.

A typical drop-off to the rescue mission involves two large SUVs filled to the brim

"They are so thankful that high school kids can bring so much," said Brandi Schlechter, volunteer manager at the Orange County Rescue Mission. "The families are really appreciative. Everything we need, we know we can count on them to collect it for us."

## TIME OUT

Crabtree and Meussner, now team captains, said they've learned a lot from Socks From Jocks.

Both acknowledge that their efforts have not gone unrecognized by college admissions counselors. Crabtree has applied to Chapman University and UC San Diego, and Meussner to Chapman, UCLA and UC Irvine.

Both said they've become closer friends and learned the ins and outs of running what is basically a business. Beyond that, the pair believe they've attacked poverty at a grassroots level.

"It's great," Crabtree said. "On rainy days, they have warm feet ... they have coats ...they have warm everything. People around here think everything is fine, but it is their responsibility to give back and help out people who are less fortunate."

Jane Meussner said Socks From Jocks has taught the boys lessons beyond anything they could have learned in a classroom.

"I think it is one of the most important things they'll do in high school and beyond," she said. "I'm extremely proud of them."

## OVERTIME

Since they started Socks From Jocks, the boys have involved 650 student athletes, who've collected 3,944 pairs of socks, 1,446 coats, 778 pairs of jeans, 550 toiletry-item bags, 316 toothbrushes, 641 pairs of sneakers, 435 jerseys, 66 large bags of assorted clothing and 22 grocery carts plus 4,200 pounds of food, and raised \$1,200 for the American Red Cross.

Crabtree and Meussner will probably live away from home while attending college, but their involvement in Socks From Jocks will continue.

Jimmy, the kid who collected toothbrushes in 2005, is a freshman at Aliso Niguel and will likely run the operation.

The next step, said Jane Meussner, is to officially achieve nonprofit status. She has no doubt Socks From Jocks will continue to flourish and grow.

"Socks From Jocks will absolutely be here five years from now and it will be bigger and better and stronger," she said. "Just look at where it has gone in three years."

Meussner and Crabtree hope to return to their high school every few years to check on the program.

Barnett said the boys will probably forget about wins and losses within a few years after graduating, but they'll forever remember the lives they've touched.

"I have a lot of respect for these young men and respect that our school is linked to it," Barnett said. "I feel like these young men have created a lasting impact. This will be their legacy."

## Socks From Jocks

Started by Aliso Niguel basketball players Harry Meussner and Conner Crabtree, the organization collects clothing and other items, which are then donated to the Orange County Rescue Mission and other beneficiaries. For information, visit: [www.socksfromjocks.com](http://www.socksfromjocks.com).



ROSE PALMISANO, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

**HELPING THE NEEDY:** Connor Crabtree, left, and Harry Meussner of Laguna Niguel collect shoes, socks and other items to donate to a local rescue mission, inspired by their coach.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JANE MEUSSNER

**HAUL:** Socks From Jocks has collected 3,944 pairs of socks, 1,446 coats, 778 pairs of jeans, 550 toiletry-item bags and more.



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**FOR A GOOD CAUSE:**

Crabtree, left, and Meussner will soon move on to college, but their charity effort will continue.