



The Poplar Bluff Mules football team chaplain, Greg Gilberto, embraces a former player last season. Photo provided by Lybby Mannon

Building Bridges

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There's always been a fine line between sports and religion, but pastor Greg Gilberto doesn't mind stepping over the line to encourage athletes and spread the gospel to those who would listen.

Gilberto has been in ministry for 40 years and is the pastor of Northpoint Nazarene Church. For nearly 25 years, he's been the team's chaplain for the Poplar Bluff Mules football team.

As a Chicago native from Glendale Heights, Gilberto made his way to the Poplar Bluff area 24 years ago and has been here ever since with his wife Jackie, of 42

years, and his family. Upon arrival, he was drawn to the community instantly but wanted to be a part of something more.

"Within two months of moving here, I knew I needed to be involved in the community," Gilberto said. "I took my resume to the athletic director at the time, and the rest is history. Without the blessing from the school board and district, none of the work I've done over the years would be possible, so I'm grateful they gave me their trust."

Gilberto got his start on the sidelines with the junior high school football team and eventually moved to the high school after being the chaplain for both for a few years. Gilberto said the community drew him into Mules football because he noticed how invested they were and thought he could be an enhancement to the already strong football program.

He said knowing the boundaries is the biggest thing about combining sports and ministry. He's not there to be a coach but to encourage the entire team and staff. On the sidelines, he considered himself a life coach. A person who could motivate the team while helping athletes build character skills and integrity.

"We are trying to train our young men to live lives beyond the field," Gilbert said. "I want the players to grow into men of integrity and grace while setting them on a path to success."

After nearly 25 years of encouraging athletes, Gilberto has spent many hours with the team and said his work had taken a lot out of him. However, he wouldn't trade it for anything, knowing he could inspire someone.

"Being around those kids is the most effective ministry other than the pulpit in this community because you're touching families," he said. "If somebody told me today that I couldn't be the chaplain anymore, I would be devastated because I've poured so much into that. I love speaking to 200 people on Sunday mornings but having the chance to speak into the lives of 60 to 80 for 25 years is just amazing."

Implementing faith

When Gilberto first became the Mules team's chaplain, he said about 80 percent of every student-athlete was born again and involved with the church. Today, not so much of the youth are involved as he wants them to be. He understands his

limitations in spreading the gospel but appreciates the kids who want to learn more.

"You can't force religion on anyone," Gilberto said. "I often get a few kids who are interested in learning about God because they're searching for something more. The thing about me is that I'm not ashamed to cross the line if it helps a kid because the gospel is life-giving. At the end of the day, I'm preaching faith to those kids, which they will need in the game and life."

Throughout the years, Gilberto said blending sports and religion has both had positive and harmful relationships in the past. But today, it's considered the most positive and much-needed tool to help the youth learn about the commitment to hard work, personal sacrifice, fairness, and achievement.

Feedback from the community has been mostly positive for Gilberto. Everywhere he goes, a parent or former player speaks kind words about how he helped them.

He said the accolades may come and go, but often, he wondered if he was doing what God called him to do. When a parent, for no apparent reason, comes up and says he or she really appreciates him for talking with his or her son, it lets Gilberto know he's right where he needs to be.

When the football players cycle through, he hopes they remember him for being caring and that he spoke the truth and lived it as well. His overall goal as team chaplain is to help groom role models for the younger generation and hopefully get them closer to God if they desire.

"Every single thing we do or speak counts," Gilberto said. "When any kid finally moves on from football, I want to know that life was infused. I want them to have life spoken into their spirit, and nobody can take that away. No amount of wins or losses is more important than leaving a better human being. It's my job as a man of ministry to take them from where they're at so they can grow as better people."

By D'COURTLAND CHRISTIAN~Daily American Republic
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