

A Two-Pronged Growth Approach

The First Tee aims to grow the game *and* grow the character of its participants

BY LARRY AYLWARD,
EDITOR IN CHIEF

Ten-year-old Jason Kopco already plays a fine golf game for a kid. So why did he join The First Tee of Cleveland, an organization that teaches youths how to play golf?

“The First Tee of Cleveland is like the Boy Scouts for golf because it teaches you all the life skills needed to be successful, like honesty and trust,” says his father, Ron. “That’s important to us.”

The First Tee of Cleveland, like its Chicago-based parent organization The First Tee, teaches golf to youngsters to help grow the game with new players. But the organization also teaches children about the character traits needed to help them grow into upstanding citizens.

Jason thanks The First Tee of Cleveland for helping him become a more



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patient person and player. And while Ron is happy his son is learning life skills that will help Jason now and later, he's also happy the boy, who has been playing since he was 3, can hone his golf skills while with the program.

"It's a win-win situation," Ron says.

The First Tee, with more than 200 chapters nationwide, says in its mission statement that it aims "to impact the lives of young people by providing learning facilities and educational programs that promote character development and life-enhancing values through the game of golf."

The World Golf Foundation created The First Tee as a way to bring golf to youngsters who otherwise would not be exposed to the game. The formation of The First Tee was announced on Nov. 13, 1997, at an event in New York's Central Park. Earl Woods, Tiger Woods' late father, helped spur the program, which also was created to make affordable and accessible golf facilities throughout the country for kids to learn the game.

Another goal of The First Tee is to make golf more ethnically diverse. The PGA Tour, the United States Golf Association, the PGA of America and the LPGA committed big bucks to fund the organization.

Since 1997, The First Tee has altered its mission slightly and added more programs focused on teaching children about positive character traits. Doris Evans, executive director of the Cleveland chapter, thought the early organization was too focused on only teaching the game. Evans didn't think the industry needed another junior golf program.

But shortly into its existence, the

organization introduced The First Tee Life Skills Experience, through which participants learn lessons about the importance of maintaining a positive attitude, how to make decisions by thinking about the possible consequences, and how to define and set goals from the golf course to everyday life. The lessons are taught through golf-related activities.

The organization also established its Nine Core Values, including honesty, integrity, sportsmanship, respect, confidence, responsibility, perseverance, courtesy and judgment. The Nine Core Values are incorporated into the learn-

ing experience and their meanings taught to the kids. In addition, they're used to name golf holes at several of The First Tee facilities.

When the national organization implemented those programs, Evans was sold on beginning a chapter in Cleveland, which was formed in 1999 and recently celebrated its 10th anniversary.

"We really have to make it clear we're a positive youth education program," Evans says. "We use golf as a context, but we're about education."

But Evans would like to see kids keep playing golf after they leave the program.

"I love golf," she says. "I think it's important kids develop a skill with their bodies. It may as well be golf."

Joe Louis Barrow, CEO of The First Tee, shares Evans' sentiments. It's obvious Barrow, who joined The First Tee in 2000, cares deeply about growing the game with younger players and growing their character because he can talk about each component randomly. Ask him if The First Tee has helped grow

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- DORIS EVANS,
THE FIRST TEE OF
CLEVELAND

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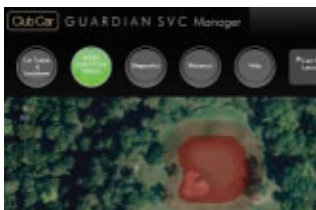


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Continued from page 59 the game with new players, and he'll rattle off statistics ingrained in his brain. Barrow says a study by The First Tee reveals 75 percent of the kids who joined the organization but are no longer involved with it are still playing golf.

"Most people are surprised and absolutely flabbergasted with our retention rates," Barrow says, noting The First Tee had about 10,000 participants when he joined and now has nearly 3 million. "We want them to continue to play golf. And we want golf to be a lifelong interest for them."

Barrow says 35 percent to 40 percent of the kids who join the organization's initial program, essentially a clinic, move into The First Tee's core program. "I would put up those numbers against any other program in the game of golf," he says.

Barrow points to a study by the National Golf Foundation that people spend almost twice as much on the game (green fees, equipment) if they learn the game through a formal program, such as The First Tee, rather than on their own.

The First Tee is a major economic



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— JOE LOUIS BARROW, CEO, THE FIRST TEE

engine that produces anywhere from \$10 million (conservative estimation) to \$30 million (liberal estimation) of revenue a year, Barrow contends.

"If you take our numbers, you can see we're a major economic engine," he says.

Barrow also believes the organization's Life Skills Experience and Nine Core Values are vital to help youth set goals, manage their emotions and gain confidence in themselves. He has several stories of how the organization has helped youths improve their lives.

Barrow talks about an inner-city African-American young man named Adam Adams,

who's studying mechanical engineering in college but had no future aspirations of going to college prior to joining The First Tee of Chicago.

"His goal in life now is to change the functions of the internal combustion engine to use different fuel, no fuel or significantly reduced fuel," Barrow says. "Before joining The First Tee, he didn't know where his life was going."

"We also have young people from California who say they would be in

[ABOUT THIS SERIES] "Growing the Game" is *Golfdom's* quarterly series – now in its fourth year – that focuses on how the golf industry can attract more players to generate more rounds. In addition to this installment on The First Tee and its impact on the game, we've also explored the impact women, minorities, disabled golfers and baby boomers can have on increasing play. We've also talked to golf course architects about ways they can make the game more friendly, and we've highlighted creative marketing programs used to attract new golfers. The next installment of the series appears in February. Visit our archives at www.golfdom.com to view the "Growing the Game" series.

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gangs if it wasn't for The First Tee. We're saving lives, changing lives and influencing lives."

So it bothers Barrow when outsiders cite golf, including The First Tee, as an elitist sport. Those people should hear the stories from the people whose lives have been positively impacted by the organization before passing judgment, Barrow says.

"Before people get so cynical, they need to talk to the parents who have all of the sudden seen their children go from a very wrong direction to a right direction because of their involvement with golf," he says.

Barrow also takes exception to people who say golf is too expensive and that the kids who move on from The First Tee won't be able to afford to play. Yes, there are country clubs that cost thousands to join and high-end public courses that cost \$100 a round, Barrow says. "But there are plenty of

municipal and public courses where you can play golf for \$10, \$15 and \$20 on weekends," he adds, noting playing nine holes of golf, which most beginners only want to do, costs about as much as going to the movies.

Barrow says he's excited about The First Tee National School Program, where the organization's philosophy is introduced in a school setting and taught by physical education instructors. The program is in 2,800 U.S. schools and has reached 14 million elementary school children.

"We're excited about it because it's our first real effort to go where the
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Ron Kopco got his son, Jason, involved in The First Tee of Cleveland because it teaches character traits similar to that of the Boy Scouts.



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Passion Required to Oversee a Chapter, as First Tee of Cleveland's Evans Proves

In one of the worst economic downturns ever, The First Tee of Cleveland experienced its best fund-raising effort ever in 2009. That's a credit to Doris Evans, The First Tee of Cleveland's executive director, who brought the passion the organization needed to succeed when it began in 1999.

"Doris has made a difference with her leadership," says Joe Louis Barrow, CEO of The First Tee, the national organization that oversees more than 200 national chapters, including Cleveland.

The First Tee teaches kids how to play golf. But Evans' passion is to help participants grow into responsible adults, not necessarily good golfers. She places tremendous emphasis on the organization's Life Skills Experience, where participants learn valuable lessons about the importance of maintaining a positive attitude, how to make decisions by thinking about the possible consequences

and how to define and set goals from the golf course to everyday life. Evans also favors the organization's teaching of its Nine Core Values, including honesty, integrity, sportsmanship, respect, confidence, responsibility, perseverance, courtesy and judgment.

"We have a philosophy — you don't teach core values, you demonstrate core values," says Evans, who is a pediatrician in the Cleveland area. "If a child sees that you're an honest person, he or she may want to be honest. But you can't tell that child to be honest. So we expose them to these concepts by our behavior."

The First Tee of Cleveland celebrated its 10th anniversary this year with a golf outing at Shaker Country Club near Cleveland. Former Cleveland Indians slugger Andre Thornton, who began the Cleveland chapter with Evans, attended the event. "Doris loves children and has devoted her life to helping



Doris Evans: "You don't teach core values, you demonstrate core values."

them," Thornton says. "I feel good about the organization after 10 years."

Thornton says he helped spearhead the project because he knew it would be a positive group for kids to join. "When you have an opportunity to do something worthwhile, you should do it," he says.

The crown jewel of The First Tee of Cleveland is the Washington Golf Learning Center, a nine-hole, par-29 golf course and 30-station driving range designed by Brit Stenson of the International Marketing Group. The course opened in 2006.

Evans credits Dave Donner, superintendent of Washington Golf Course, for providing a top-shelf course, not to mention teaching the kids about agronomy. Evans also says The First Tee of Cleveland's board, staff and volunteers have contributed significantly to the program's success.

Evans is retiring from her post next summer. She says she's overjoyed about how far the Cleveland chapter has come, but there's still plenty of work to be done before going.

"To do this kind of work, one has to feel a calling," Evans says. And one must have a passion to provide that service, she adds. "If you feel that way, you will convey it in everything you feel and do," Evans says.

— Larry Aylward

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young people are," Barrow says. "Being able to introduce golf and the Nine Core Values and Life Skills Experience in a school setting has had a positive influence on those young kids."

Barrow says The First Tee has come a long way in a short time. In 12 years, it has succeeded in growing the game and growing children's lives.

"The most important investment we can make in our society is with young people," Barrow says. ■

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