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## Ex-Marine stirs the young, helps the needy

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Jim Fleming a former Marine and high school jock is nothing if not competitive, and his team from the McDougald Terrace public housing complex -- the children sitting around him under a small picnic shelter -- did not win a single game in Durham's recreational baseball league this season.

But Fleming sees success a bit differently these days. That is why he took it upon himself during his first year at Durham Technical Community College to get the campus more involved in helping others -- much more involved.

"We need to thank our coach," team mom Erica Young told the small group of parents and children gathered at the shelter. "We wouldn't be here tonight if Jim didn't step up, get others involved and make this happen."

The same can be said for the way Fleming, who turns 25 this month, got Durham Tech involved in local relief efforts for Hurricane Katrina. Or how he took a fairly low-key community outreach event and turned it into a showcase for health and education services.

"You don't see too many students come through here who understand the potential of what the student body can really do as a group," said Barbara Baker, vice president for student support and a 22-year employee at Durham Tech. "He not only understands, he has the ability to get people to genuinely want to help."

Fleming says those who knew him as a child wouldn't suspect he would be attracting attention for volunteer efforts. He was mostly into sports while growing up in Virginia and Hawaii. Those who remember him recall a youth who put a premium on winning.

"Losing as a player really bothered me," he said. "I took winning way too seriously."

His outlook began to change once he joined the Marines. That was six years ago, after he graduated from high school.

His enlistment was predictable. His father is a Vietnam veteran and a retired naval officer with 20 years of service. His mother was an FBI agent for 30 years.

What wasn't predictable was the way the military changed Fleming. At first he gained a better understanding of what it meant to work as a unit. Then he began to apply that knowledge to working in the community.

### Leading 'delinquents'

While stationed in Pensacola, Fla., Fleming found that he really enjoyed working with children who were considered juvenile delinquents by the state. And the children seemed to respect Fleming and his fellow Marines for listening. Before long, he was running the program.

Several years later, he found it equally satisfying when he got a chance to work with children at an orphanage in Africa. "They liked to play soccer with the Marines," Fleming said of his time off during a six-month stint in Djibouti City. "But what they really wanted us to do was teach them baseball. They were so receptive."



Jim Fleming, center, and his baseball team from McDougald Terrace in Durham won no games this year. But Fleming, the players and their parents know what it means to win.

*Staff Photo by Chuck Liddy*

Fleming applied to UNC-Chapel Hill when he left the Marines but wasn't accepted. He chose to attend Durham Tech instead, knowing that the school sends more transfer students to UNC than any other community college. He had no idea that the school also served such a wide range of students and offered so many chances to volunteer.

He had barely settled in when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in September. He decided that Durham Tech needed to help those who had been evacuated to the Triangle.

"He walked in one day and asked me what the campus was going to do," Baker said. "Really, we didn't have a plan because I was wondering the same thing. So I called social services and waited for a reply."

That wasn't fast enough for Fleming. He drove over to the evacuation headquarters.

"I'm from Durham Tech," he told a security guard he met, "and we're here to help."

The guard tried to explain that people couldn't just show up at the center uninvited, but Fleming was undeterred. He kept telling the man that Durham Tech was there to help.

"I smiled a lot, too," Fleming said. "I figured that couldn't hurt."

When the guard finally relented, Fleming got a similar reaction from workers inside the center. Then he got a break. They needed help shuttling evacuees back and forth from the RBC Center. Fleming went back to the campus to assign the school its task.

"Most people would have just said 'OK, I tried' and leave it that," Baker said. "But he pushed until he found a way to help and then took it upon himself to organize staff and students into shifts."

### **Making a system work**

Jennifer Millhollin saw that same kind of focus when Fleming started organizing a local event called Food For Thought.

By this time Fleming was working with the student government -- a group he now leads as its president. Food For Thought was a fledgling program designed to let neighbors know more about the nearby campus. But the program had fallen short of expectations the year before, and Fleming thought the school could better educate neighbors about the opportunities it offered.

"He didn't really work inside the system," said Millhollin, a student government representative at the state level. "It's more like he forced the system to work for him."

Trained as an air traffic controller in the Marines, Fleming applies the same principles to volunteer work: Communicate, find out what people want, determine the objective and break down the task into separate steps. So in the case of Food For Thought, it meant offering pizza and letting administrators make their pitch about the school. But it also meant finding tents, chairs and more food so people would feel comfortable. It meant contacting other groups who could participate. It meant working with people who could pump up the turnout.

Before it was over, more than 300 people at McDougald Terrace showed up for the event. In the process, Fleming was approached about reviving a baseball team for the children.

He liked that idea. He recruited a couple of Durham Tech students to help him -- Alejandro Valentin and Morris Windless -- and used the strategy he had learned in the Marines: He broke down the task into manageable steps. It turned out to be many more steps than expected because some of the children had never picked up a baseball before.

But the children got better as the year went on. Most enjoyed themselves to the very end.