A meeting with kids reveals the character of Coach Bill Lynch

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This guest column was written by Matthew Careskey, an Indiana University student and Advocate for Community Engagement (ACE) at the Boys and Girls Club in Crestmont.

It’s a late Monday afternoon at the Crestmont Boys and Girls Club, where some of Bloomington’s most needy children are occupied in a four-square game, a Jenga competition and painting in the not-so-state-of-the-art art room. Like every Monday, it is “career-day,” when professionals come to impart some of their wisdom regarding their career choice — essentially role-modeling the path to a successful lifestyle to underprivileged youth.

Most of the kids are thinking, “career?!?” — a few in middle-school have dreams of playing football for Florida State, and are confident they will one day hoist the Heisman with pride. Most, however, just want to be king of the four-square game. That’s what, for them, makes “Career Day” such a bummer: They have to stop their four-square.

The children’s enthusiasm (or lack of same) is no different when Indiana University head football coach Bill Lynch greets the crowd, as most of them are still angry they couldn’t finish their four-square. A little more humbling than 40,000 strong at the Rock against Penn State, huh Bill?

A handful of wired, highly distracted elementary and middle-schoolers in the middle of Bloomington’s poorest neighborhood in a room the size of a freshman dorm — the last place you’d expect to find a Big Ten football coach (who at the time had bowl-eligibility questions) holding a meeting. Still, he showed up, bringing his enthusiasm along with a few football guides and bumper stickers. After understanding it was career day, he knew pretty much the type of talk he was to give: explain how he got where he is today. But in his tone, there was a deeper understanding of the purpose of his visit.

Not intimidated by the stone-cold gazes of these four-square-players-turned-career-explorers, Lynch began describing the discipline one needs not only to be a college football player or coach, but also to achieve any goals in life. But these temporarily playground-deprived kids wanted more — they wanted Lynch to get personal: Were you in the NFL? Are you with the Colts? Do you like offense or defense more?

Of course, Lynch was again unfazed as he answered each question and even added some deeper insight into each of his responses. He knew the meaning of this visit. Regardless how the kids felt at the time, Coach knew the impact this encounter would have, maybe in a week, a month or
maybe a few years; the fact that he just showed up would eventually leave some impression on at least some of the kids at the Crestmont Boys and Girls Club.

So, about an hour after he arrived, “Career Day” officially ended. Cameras and photos perhaps to show at future fundraising events? Nope. Of course not. Just as unassuming as he arrived, this particular Big Ten football coach left. In the middle of the season, Bill Lynch still honored his commitment to the children of the Crestmont Boys and Girls Club. Sure, sending IU to a bowl for the first time on 14 years will leave a lasting impression on his legacy here, but something about his visit to Crestmont shows where he wants his true legacy to be made.

Not many at IU are afforded the opportunity to see our football coach carry out such simple, though important, acts of kindness and selfless service. But this writer did, and he wants our community to know that what Coach Lynch does, as impressive as it is, is matched or even surpassed by how he does it.

In years to come, long after this writer has forgotten the scores and highlights of a season’s games, he will recall a simple, unadorned trip that Coach Lynch made to chat with some fatherless boys. Not everything that matters makes it to the sports pages or, sadly, anywhere else.