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IAN HUNTER, SPECIAL TO THE INDEPENDENT

## Dreaming big in a small town

Bright family creates its own 'Field of Dreams' — true to the classic film — in their corn field

**Ian Hunter**

*Special to the Independent*

Just west of Bright, there's a place that looks and feels like baseball heaven.

It's a baseball diamond with most of the features of a big-league field; a backstop, pitcher's mound, scoreboard, bleachers, and a home run fence. There is one big difference; this diamond is surrounded by a corn field, just like the movie *Field of Dreams*.

To Mike Van Boekel and his family, it's their own little piece of baseball paradise.

The Van Boekels are the proud purveyors of this homage to the baseball diamond from the classic baseball film. Just like Kevin Costner's character in the movie, Van Boekel sacrificed part of his farmland to construct a ball field back in 2011.

"We didn't have a big yard and our kids were getting bigger, so we decided to put in a ball field where our corn field normally is. I thought my dad was going to kill me when he saw what we were doing, but we took out an acre of corn and started building it."

Although the project was a huge undertaking, Van Boekel quickly noticed how members of his community helped pitch in to construct the field. Neighbours offered to help him build a home run fence and there was even an anonymous donation on his front porch one day. It was a set of magnetic bases and home plate for the field with a note which simply said: "For the kids."

During the late summer, the field is

nestled among seven-foot-high corn stalks, which makes for the perfect backdrop for a baseball game in the summer. Van Boekel says it's not unusual to see people taking pictures of the field or to even witness kids playing catch on the grass.

"A lot of semis will pull over and the trucker will stand there with their phone, and some will even come to the door and ask about it. We've had people stop in and ask whether the field was the township's, whether it belonged to the church nearby, or if it was ours. We've even had a couple take their wedding photos out there."

The Field of Dreams is a local landmark and nearby youth baseball players often find themselves playing there until the sun goes down. Van Boekel says when he coached, their team always practised at their diamond every week.

"The kids would practice for two-and-a-half hours here every week, not realizing how good they were getting. The parents loved it because they would drop the kids off here and it would be like date night for them every Friday night. I love it, though," said Van Boekel.

Baseball is prevalent throughout the Van Boekel family. Mike himself was an accomplished baseball player who played in the Canadian Senior Men's Fastball Championships for five consecutive years and later moved onto coaching the local Innerkip fastball team. His two sons are talented players in their own right; Jacob just moved to Queen's University to play for

their varsity baseball team, and Greg isn't far behind. The Van Boekel boys captured gold playing for the Chepstow Lightning at the under-16 boys Canadian Fastpitch Championships in 2015.

The diamond is called the "Field of Dreams" after all, and a few years ago, Van Boekel's family orchestrated a surprise he won't soon forget. One ordinary Saturday afternoon, the kids were playing catch outside when Van Boekel looked into the field and noticed an older gentleman walk through the corn wearing a turn-of-the-century baseball uniform.

Then another baseball player walked through the corn, followed by an umpire and some more players. Not one of them said a thing; they stared into the sky, completely awestruck. Van Boekel was flabbergasted when he saw what was happening: "Who are these people in the outfield — are you not seeing this?" he remarked to his best friend sitting beside him on the bleachers.

After the older players emerged from the field, two full teams of kids followed behind them and began playing on the field as the older players took seats on the bleachers as spectators. It was almost exactly like the scene taken straight out of *Field of Dreams*. That afternoon, the Van Boekels were presented with a "Field of Dreams" sign from their neighbours which currently hangs proudly on their baseball backstop.

Van Boekel has visions for what may come down the road for his field. Mike

wants a beer tent; his daughter Hannah wants a food booth; the kids who play on the field would love to have lights installed so they could play until the wee hours. However, Mike's wife Jennifer notes that the kids might never go home if that were to happen.

As Van Boekel watched his sons play catch on the field mere days before sending his oldest son off to university, he noted why the *Field of Dreams* elicits a strong sense of peace and serenity.

"I personally think the kids like the field because it's a shorter fence than the typical diamond, but the parents like it because it makes them nostalgic."

No matter if you're an adult whose little league days are long gone, or you're a youngster just getting into the game, one can't help but feel like a little kid out there on Van Boekel's baseball field.

Much like Costner's character in the movie, Van Boekel turned some heads by taking one acre of his corn and converting it into a baseball field. There may not have been a voice commanding him "if you build it, they will come", but curious baseball enthusiasts continue to discover this treasured local landmark.

One of the most memorable lines from the *Field of Dreams* movie — "Is this heaven?" — may cross the mind of people who step onto Van Boekel's field for the first time. For a baseball fan, this field is about as close as you can get to paradise.