

Duke serves up recovery

By Michael Lananna
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Jolene Nagel stood by the net, dressed in a royal blue Duke jacket and holding a whistle in her hand.

As Friday's late afternoon light filtered through the gym windows, Nagel, Duke's volleyball coach, peered at the attentive faces surrounding her.

This was a different crowd, yet a familiar one.

"What we're going to try to do is go through the skills just to refresh your memory," she told the group, cracking a smile. "Because I know you've been practicing them all the time."

Laughter filled the room. This wasn't Cameron Indoor Stadium. This was a gym located on the Triangle Residential Options for Substance Abusers (TROSA) campus.

Nagel brought her Blue Devils, in uniform, but she wasn't speaking to them. She was speaking to the more than 50 TROSA residents eager to test their volleyball skills.

For the first time this year – and third time overall – Duke led a TROSA volleyball clinic.

"They told me the clinic was coming up, and I'm like, 'Oh, gosh. My serve is out of whack,'" said 51-year-old TROSA resident Genna Vega, laughing. "But this is great, though. They take you in each individual area to work individually, to work one-on-one with the women to brush up on your skills."

For Vega, the sight of the Duke volleyball players took on additional meaning. Her niece, Christiana Gray, was a senior captain on the team a year ago, and though Gray wasn't at the

gym Friday, Vega said she could feel her presence.

It was through Gray that Vega had first learned about TROSA, a two-year residential program that provides therapy, vocational training, healthcare and other services free of charge to more than 400 residents.

And it was through Vega that Gray first developed a love for the game.

"We played volleyball together when she was young," Vega said. "She tells everybody that 'My aunt taught me the fundamentals of volleyball.' I beat my chest when she says that. She's such a wonderful athlete."

The connection between TROSA and the volleyball team runs deeper than that pair, however. It began with Nagel's two sons playing sports with TROSA President and CEO Kevin McDonald's children. Nagel and McDonald developed a quick bond, which led McDonald to invite the coach and her team to tour the TROSA facilities.

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*Genna Vega,
TROSA resident*

"Once we had the tour, we saw how they were so self-sufficient," Nagel said. "We saw the gym. There was no volleyball stuff. I got to thinking, it would be great if we could get them started."

Since then, the Duke volleyball team has donated equipment and clothes, led two clinics last year and will lead at least one more



TROSA resident Genna Vega (left) prepares to strike a ball held up by Duke volleyball player Alyse Whitaker. (Staff photo by Michael Lananna)

this year. Nagel even delivered the keynote speech at TROSA's graduation last August.

In return, many TROSA residents have become ardent supporters of the Duke volleyball team, filling the stands on game nights.

"Oh yeah, they're some of our loudest supporters," said senior middle blocker Chelsea Cook. "They always sit in the same spot, and they're very, very loud, and they get rowdy. So they're some of our greatest fans there."

Cook said she was glad for the opportunity to be able to give back to a Durham community that has given her so much in the last four years.

After individual groups worked on fine-tuning their skills for the first hour Friday, the entire group came together to play a game of volleyball. No one kept score or recorded stats of any kind. Players of all ages and athletic backgrounds rotated in and out of the game, while Duke players stood on the sidelines. Sometimes, a ball would find its way to a Blue Devil, and she would poke it

back in.

The game was competitive, but there was also a sense of familial support. If residents struggled to serve the ball over the net, their fellow residents on both sides cheered them on until they did so. At one point, a resident dove for the ball and slammed hard on the court. His strike didn't send the ball over the net, but he was greeted with rousing applause.

Throughout the contest, McDonald looked on from his seat on the sideline, enjoying the merging of two programs that he cares very much about. He said he thinks the collaboration is beneficial for both groups. The residents learn to enjoy themselves without relying on a substance, and the Duke players get a different perspective on the world around them.

"I think people aren't so different," McDonald said. "I think there's a fine line. There are people here that have MBAs at TROSA, and there are people who can't read and write.

"But there's a common language here. It's called fun."