



FOR BEARS' TILLMAN, COMMUNITY WORK COMES FROM THE HEART

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Every NFL team features many players who do great things in their communities. Over the next two weeks, NFL.com will feature one player from each team and highlight their efforts. In this installment: the NFC North:

Charles Tillman , Bears While speaking with the Bears' Charles Tillman, his 3-year-old daughter Tiana interrupts with a tug of the pant leg to let him know that it's time for tea. She has the cups, saucers and dolls all set up for the 6-foot-2 cornerback to perch on a tiny chair and partake in the afternoon ritual and wants to know when he'll be ready.

"Apologies if I have to go soon, but tea time is important around here," explains Tillman.

Understood considering it's just short of a miracle that Tiana is even around today after being diagnosed with dilated cardiomyopathy, an enlargement of the heart, when she was just three months old. The doctors initially told Tillman and his wife that Tiana might not make it through the night, and later suggested an experimental device called a Berlin heart to try to keep her alive while they placed her on a list for a donor heart. In what can only be described as a blessing through tragedy, she received one when an infant in Minnesota died suddenly and the heart was airlifted in the six-hour time frame needed for the transplant to take place.

This past April, Tillman appeared on "Oprah" with his family and met the mother that agreed to donate her son's organs.

"They usually keep the donor's information pretty secret, so we had no idea we would meet her until we were in the middle of the show, but it was beautiful to be able to say thank you to this total stranger who saved my daughter's life," Tillman said. "My wife and I can never bring her son back, but this mother blessed our daughter by not letting her die -- and not just our daughter, but the other sick children she blessed by

donating his other organs as well."

Tillman has since become an advocate for organ donation and has gone in front of Congress to speak to the merits of the Berlin heart in order for it to get FDA approval.

He has also switched the focus of his Cornerstone 33 Foundation from education to assisting critically ill children and their families after spending considerable time in the hospital himself.

And Tillman's favorite function from his foundation is actually strictly for the mothers of the sick children, when he throws a luncheon for them at the Omni Chicago Hotel and pampers them with gifts and spa packages.

"This is something I couldn't understand, but a lot of the moms blame themselves for whatever their child is going through," said Tillman, explaining that even his own wife felt like she must have done something wrong during her pregnancy to warrant Tiana's condition. "But we have the mothers tell their stories and then they realize that all these moms with sick babies feel the same way, and they have this forum where they relate to each other and share their experiences."

Tillman says there's not a dry eye in the house afterwards and freely admits to breaking down himself, but he says it's worth it because most mothers haven't left their child's bedside in months.

"I get so much fulfillment out of seeing them be able to relax even if it's just for a few hours," said Tillman, who had 150 mothers at the 2011 luncheon. "The sad reality is that not every kid makes it, but this becomes a safe forum for the moms to tell their stories."

Because Tillman's child was one of the lucky ones who did make it, now he really must excuse himself -- tea time with Tiana awaits.

Chad Greenway , Vikings Growing up on a 2,000-acre farm in South Dakota, Vikings linebacker Chad Greenway learned the value of helping the less fortunate early on by way of swine.

"My parents started that farm back when they were married at 18 and built it up from nothing," said Greenway. "But around the holidays they always gave a pig to our church so they could divvy it up to families in need so they could have ham and bacon to serve with their meal."

The population of Greenway's hometown is about 400 individuals strong so he says it was easy to identify families requiring a bit of assistance, but that it was a "no brainer"

to volunteer on a larger scale once he landed in the NFL six years ago.

"There's no way I would pass up that opportunity to give back once I was in the league," said Greenway. "When you have that kind of platform it's remarkable what you can do. Even in the beginning, just getting teammates to come out and greet children and their families really lifts their spirits when they're going through hard times."

Greenway has several core initiatives in his Lead The Way Foundation , including donating money to local hospitals and establishing football and basketball camps in Minnesota, South Dakota and Iowa, but one of his favorite charitable events includes a whole lot of waterslides.

With the help of social workers who assist children with medical needs in the area, Greenway chose 15 families and brought them on an all-expense-paid three-day trip this summer to Wisconsin Dells, America's largest waterpark.

"We worked with the resort there for lodging and food and were able to give them gas money and free arcades, but it's just a chance for them to get away for a few days," Greenway said. "A lot of these families are burdened so much financially that they aren't able to take a school vacation or even a weekend away so the response we get for something like this is just incredible."

And to think that it all started with a life lesson early on from a few pigs.

Stephen Tulloch , Lions Lions linebacker Stephen Tulloch has a career-high three sacks this season, but it was his takedown in Week 8 that made the most highlight reels, after "Tebowing" to Tebow , himself at the height of the trend.

While the good-natured Tulloch says it was of course "out of fun," he's been making other headlines for his community work in his new home after five seasons with the Titans.

Tulloch started the Stephen Tulloch Foundation in honor of his mother, who worked several jobs in the Miami area where he was raised in order to make ends meet.

"As an NFL player, I have the opportunity to continue my mother's legacy and help those who are at a disadvantage," Tulloch said. "My mom taught me to open my heart and give to those every chance I get."

His foundation's mission is to "provide underprivileged children the same opportunities as other children."

He's raised money for the foundation in Detroit the sweet way by launching his own "linebacker" cupcake which is available at Just Baked stores across the state (blue velvet with a cream cheese frosting, in case you're so inclined).

To counteract the cupcakes, he's taken 55 kids (to match his No. 55 jersey) to the dentist to get their teeth cleaned for free.

He also visited the new Jalen Rose Leadership Academy and sponsored an essay contest to bring the class with the best prose to a Lions game last month.

And in the vein of equal opportunity, he has brought a dozen Detroit youth for a good old-fashioned trip to a 3-D movie, the re-released 1994 classic "The Lion King."

As for his Tebowing, Tulloch received word from No. 15 himself that it was hakuna matata -- no worries, mate.

Mason Crosby , Packers When the Packers Mason Crosby isn't kicking on the field you can more than likely find him kicking it on the links.

An avid golfer, Crosby has put his hobby to good use by hitting up countless charitable golf tournaments that raise money for non-profit organizations, such as the Vince Lombardi Foundation for cancer research and the Tellurian Family of Services for addiction.

In September, he co-hosted the Packers Golf Invitational for his own chosen charity -- the Freedom House Foundation, which supports families that have fallen on hard times.

"It provides temporary living and education for people to help them get out of a bad situation," said Crosby after the tourney. "The goal is to help people to get out of the situation they are currently in, and give them the skills they need to keep them from making those same mistakes that took them there the first time."

Crosby emphasizes that it's "not just a handout, but a hand up," and also supports House for Hope, which is a place for young, single mothers to go for assistance.

Off the course, Crosby is also a supporter of the military by going head-to-head via Xbox with Wisconsin natives stationed in Iraq, showing up to pay his respects before they're deployed and once even riding a helicopter onto the nuclear-powered Navy supercarrier, the USS John C. Stennis, to watch Super Bowl XLIV with more than 2,000 sailors on board -- although no word if he pulled an "I am Legend" (or a Kramer) and hit a few Titleists into the sea.

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