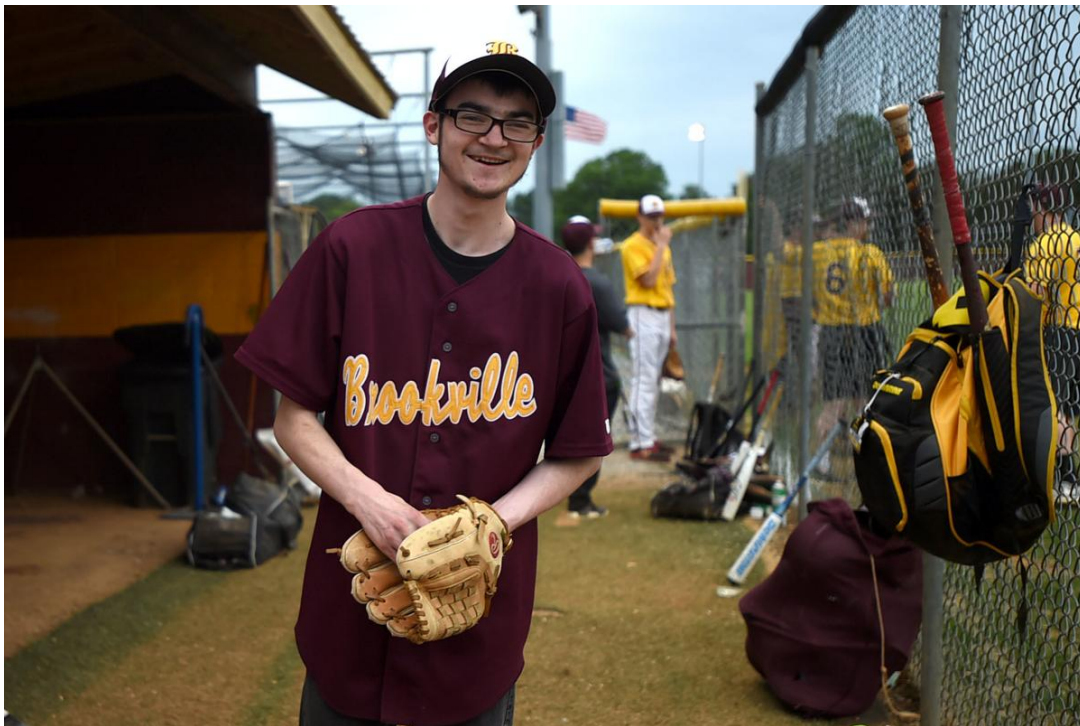


https://www.newsadvance.com/news/local/the-mayor-of-brookville-bailey-rice-spreads-joy-through-campbell/article_16995291-9610-5ee9-9b82-a4b1e335c20e.html

The Mayor of Brookville Bailey Rice spreads joy through Campbell County school — ‘You look at him and you’re just happy’

Ben Cates
May 17, 2019



Bailey Rice, a Brookville graduate, stands in the dugout before delivering the first pitch at a Brookville baseball game at Brookville High School in Lynchburg, VA, April 24, 2019. Rice has thrown out the first pitch for Brookville the entire season. Rice is currently in a work-study program at Brookville and works with baseball Head Coach Chris Glaize as his teaching assistant on a daily basis. "Everybody loves Bailey," Glaize has said about Rice's time at Brookville High School. (Taylor Irby/The News & Advance)

Taylor Irby/The News & Advance

Bailey Rice is all smiles as he bursts into Dayn Washburn's world history class, where students sit in a dark room, 25 shadows illuminated by the light of a PowerPoint presentation.

No one seems to mind the interruption. In fact, it's a common occurrence — the kind that always seems to fill the hearts of students and teachers at Brookville High School with happiness.

Bailey isn't the only one wearing a smile. Washburn is, too. So are the students. The 20-year-old Rice has stopped by for a chat, taking a break from his duties helping custodian Mike Mason with his afternoon cleaning rounds.

Washburn breaks from his instruction, strolls over to his computer and fires up a video. There's Bailey on Brookville's baseball diamond. A game is about to begin, but there's one ritual that must take place first: Bailey will throw out the ceremonial first pitch.

On the screen, baseball coach Chris Glaize, a broad smile on his face, hands Bailey the ball. Bailey winds up and fires the ball to home plate, where it pops into the glove of catcher Jared Glinski. There's a smattering of applause in the classroom as Bailey points to the screen. "That's me!" he says.

Yes, that's him, the boy kids at school refer to simply as "Bailey," the one who graduated last spring and yet still holds court at Brookville, the one who attends baseball and football games religiously, whose riotous laughter echoes through the halls.

Brookville might not have a bigger fan than Bailey Rice. But the students, the athletes, the coaches, the teachers, they're all his fans, too.

"He's the coolest kid ever," football coach Jon Meeks said recently. "He's like a rock star."

Around the school

At Brookville, Bailey is categorized as a special needs student with multiple disabilities. He was born with a heart defect, has undergone several heart surgeries and suffers from seizures. His speech is often difficult to understand.

"He's just a slow learner," his mother, Kimberly Lewis, said. "He has a heart condition, which made him delayed at everything."

Bailey currently is enrolled in a work-study program offered by Campbell County Public Schools that focuses on providing additional skills to post-graduate students.

Special education teacher Wanda Burns works with Bailey four days a week, drilling in English and math skills. One day per week is reserved for his job at Home Depot, where he is supervised by a job coach. Bailey is allowed to stay in the program at Brookville until he turns 22 years old.

Much of Burns' time is spent teaching special education students vocational skills, like how to interact with others and follow directions. She also focuses on helping them narrow their interests as they prepare for the workforce.

“I ask them, ‘What do you want to be?’ and they might say they want to be a pro football player,” Burns said. “And I go, ‘Well, do you play pro football now? No?’ Well, OK, what can we do to get you close to that?”

“Or they say, ‘I want to ride horses.’ Well, if you don’t do that now, maybe you could volunteer at a vet’s office or at the humane society. It’s about trying to get them to look at things a little more realistically.”

Between classes, Bailey might visit Glaize. He serves as the baseball coach’s aide, and the two have developed a strong bond over the years. Glaize supervises Bailey at football games in the fall and encourages him to throw out the first pitch at baseball games in the spring.

Then, Bailey will spend one period with Mason, cleaning desks and wiping down fixtures around the high school. Invariably, people stop to say hello: soon-to-be graduates like quarterback Zack Mann, wide receiver Micah Glaize, teachers, coaches and administrators.

“He has this innate ability to make you feel good,” Burns said. “You look at him and you’re just happy. ... You walk down the hallways with Bailey and kids are high-fiving him and everybody knows him.”

Bailey is so popular — and has become such a fixture at BHS — that Assistant Principal Jeff Burnett gave him a nickname: The Mayor of Brookville.

“He is a friend to everybody,” Burnett said. “He walks down the hallways and greets everybody like he’s running for office.”

The first pitch

These are thrilling times for the baseball team. The Bees boast a 16-6 record, have hovered near the top of the Seminole District standings all season and are headed to postseason play in the Region 3C tournament, which begins late next week. Win two games in that tourney and the Bees will advance to the Class 3 state tournament, which they last did in 2017. The 2018 season was a bust. This season there’s hope.

No one is enjoying the ride as much as Bailey. He roams the home dugout wearing his Brookville baseball hat, the brim tilted high. An oversized glove hangs on his left hand. He tosses a baseball from his right hand into his glove, preparing to throw out tonight’s first pitch. He stops a player walking through the dugout.

“Shoe’s untied,” he jokes. For Bailey, often full of jokes, this is a standard line. The player looks down at his cleats, tied up tight. “Haha! Made you look!” Bailey shouts.

Meeks, the football coach, accompanies Bailey to baseball games and stands nearby as the youngster warms up in the batting cage.

“Hey Bailey,” Meeks says. “What pitch are you going to throw?”

This, too, is a joke. Bailey has only one pitch.

“The heater!” Bailey yells, meaning his fastball.

The teams are introduced, a teenage cast of characters seeking glory on their spring stage. The national anthem blares over the public address system, complete with applause when the song winds down.

Then a voice sounds over the microphone. Here to throw out the first pitch, a young man shouts from high in the press box, is Bailey Rice.

Bailey takes long strides onto the field, where Chris Glaize meets him with the ball. Bailey's favorite song starts to play. It's Waylon Jennings singing about the good ol' boys.

The first pitch is actually three pitches sometimes, and on this night, that's the case. And just like Bailey said, he delivers "the heater" every time, each pitch floating into the catcher's glove.

The crowd applauds Bailey, who tips his cap and smiles. No one, though, looks happier than Glaize, the coach who has spent countless hours the last three years with Bailey.

"I'm not a mentor," Glaize insisted as he sat in the dugout on a different afternoon. "I'm a friend, because I've learned as much from Bailey as he has from me."

He's often reminded of those lessons during games. If the team isn't playing well, Glaize might find himself steaming in the dugout. Then he'll hear Bailey's laughter and Glaize's attitude starts to change.

"The thing I've learned is that if anybody deserves to be in a bad mood, it's Bailey," Glaize said. "But he never is. He takes life head-on.

"I get emotional talking about him. We're playing a game out here that Bailey can't play. He would love to be out here playing. So I have no right to be upset."

Through Bailey's eyes

All energy, all smiles. That's how Meeks describes Bailey Rice. And the coach is right: The energy bubbles to the surface when Bailey interacts with his friends. Meeks' assessment is a common one around Brookville. Everyone, it seems, loves Bailey. Over and over, people make the same remarks: He makes us happy, he's always in a good mood, he's fun to be around, he's filled with kindness.

"I've said this many times," Burnett, the assistant principal, said. "If we had 1,000 Bailey Rices in our building, although Brookville is a wonderful place, what a better place it would be."

Bailey can remain in the work-study program at BHS for one more year.

“He’s working very hard on transitioning into the workforce,” Burns said, “with the intent that he will eventually be more independent.”

Burns sits in her classroom. It’s quiet at the moment, but students will soon return, some clamoring for attention, others going privately about their business. There are some days, the teacher admits, when she isn’t sure she’s making progress; days when Bailey appears particularly emotional, times when he forgets basic facts he learned long ago. Then there are other days, when she knows all the work is paying off and Bailey is learning.

But no matter the day, she said, his smile shines through, and it’s infectious, spreading over his face, through his eyes and out toward others.

“If everyone could look at the world through Bailey’s eyes,” Burns said, “the world would be such a beautiful, wonderful place.”

Ben Cates

Ben Cates covers high school sports for The News & Advance. Reach him at (434) 385-5527.