

Duck Dynasty's Si Robertson Backs Real-Life 'Field of Dreams' in Louisiana

Like baseball players emerging from a cornfield in the 1989 Hollywood hit *Field of Dreams*, supporters are lining up behind a Colorado pastor's vision of building a nearly \$1 million ball park "in the name of Jesus and to the glory of God" in Louisiana.

Though he's not heard a voice telling him to "build it and he will come" as Ray Kinsella (Kevin Costner) did on his Iowa farm-turned-baseball field in the Oscar-nominated film, Pastor Jonathan Wiggins believes that rallying a divided town around a first-class baseball complex in northeast Louisiana is an idea inspired by God.

Wiggins, who led worship at his father-in-law's Providence Church as a teenager and later for larger Louisiana congregations, believes that a collaborative baseball-themed project will erase some of the racial, economic and social divisions that exist even among members of the Body of Christ in Lake Providence, where he met his wife and began his career in ministry.

Two popular television characters, an author and talk show host, and a southern sheriff believe Wiggins' dream of constructing a three-field baseball complex in East Carroll Parish is a home-run idea, and they want to be on his team in supporting and building it in Lake Providence.

Uncle Silas "Si" Robertson of A&E's *Duck Dynasty*, who's fond of quoting Bible verses John 3:16-17 during media interviews, says "That's a fact, Jack" of his support for building ball fields, dugouts, restrooms, bleachers, an announcer's booth and erecting field lights in Lake Providence's version of

Field of Dreams. “Hey Jack!” and “Good Grief!” are other characteristic phrases used by “Si” Robertson, a preacher and author of *Si-cology 1: Tales and Wisdom From Duck Dynasty’s Favorite Uncle*.

The vision to build a top-flight baseball venue in Lake Providence, which is within walking distance of the Mississippi River, flows from Wiggins’ and Resurrection Fellowship’s “adoption” of the town in 2013. The church’s long-term commitment to the town is drawing praise and support from outside the community, which was infamously featured on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1994 and in a 2013 CNN documentary.

The standout character of A&E’s reality TV program that revolves around duck call manufacturer Duck Commander and the family that leads it, Robertson told Wiggins by telephone that he intends to go to bat for Lake Providence in 2014. Robertson has publicly repeated his support for the Louisiana Delta’s version of *Field of Dreams* on a Christian radio program.

Robertson, who inserts reeds into duck calls at his brother Phil Robertson’s family business in West Monroe, Louisiana, told a local listeners of *All Things Southern* and its host, Shellie Rushing Tomlinson, that he’s a fan of Wiggins and Resurrection Fellowship. A general contractor who attends the Colorado church is working with Lake Providence officials in drafting plans for the baseball complex.

An author of several humor books and a serious Christian tome, *Heart Wide Open*, Rushing Tomlinson is also plugging the Louisiana Delta “Field of Dreams” on her radio program where “Uncle Si” is a frequent guest and a personal friend of the broadcast and print ministry headed by the “Belle of All Things Southern.”

Another Robertson family member, Robertson’s daughter-in-law Marsha, joins Uncle Si and another cable TV personality from

the History Channel's *Mountain Men* in supporting the future Eugene Haley Baseball Complex. Haley is a retired public school principal, umpire, coach and a Dixie Youth Baseball League board member who resides in Lake Providence and attends Providence Church.

The Robertsons, the *Mountain Men* TV personality, and Rushing Tomlinson will join the sheriff of East Carroll Parish at a large-scale praise-and-worship event, featuring musicians and vocalists from Resurrection Fellowship in August.

"It's an excellent project because baseball fields are perfect foundations for children of all races to learn to play sports in a healthy but competitive team environment," says Sheriff Wydette Williams. "It's a great morale booster as well."

The sheriff's 10-year-old son, Wydette Jr., showed interest in playing baseball when he was six, two years before the senior Williams became the parish's first African-American top law enforcement official in 2012.

Concerned by conditions at the ball field, Williams volunteered time and resources making cosmetic improvements to the diamond, outfield and ballpark buildings so his son's teammates would feel proud playing there.

Since 2010, field conditions have worsened as Lake Providence recreation officials deal with budget limitations. In the same four-year period, Wydette Jr., who dreams of playing in the major leagues like his heroes Jackie Robinson and Babe Ruth, has spent time on the pitcher's mound and in the short-stop position.

It's the dreams of Lake Providence families that are motivating Wiggins to assemble an All-Star team of players—from Colorado to Louisiana and beyond—that will donate money, materials or time in collaboratively building the Delta's "Field of Dreams."

To that end, the website was created in advance of a August 2014 praise and worship event in Lake Providence. The outdoor experience is designed to rally churches, businesses and civic group around the "Field of Dreams" and, more importantly, Jesus Christ as he's magnified through varied musical styles and voices that reflect the diversity of the Body of Christ.

"Lake Providence is filled with great people who largely are looking for ways to come out of their comfort zones for the sake of their children and grandchildren," Wiggins says.

However, he says, a culture of collaboration has not been firmly established in Lake Providence. He suggests that media has perpetuated divisions by reinforcing differences and stereotypes. "The result of this void (collaboration) is the narrative of great division," Wiggins says.

One notable exception is in youth sports, namely baseball which is the only persistently integrated activity in Lake Providence.

"For many years, there was a racially integrated baseball program which served as something of a bridge between peoples—a place where everybody came together as equals to play that quintessentially American game," Wiggins says.

That tradition has unfortunately eroded on pace with the current baseball field and surrounding structures.

The "Belle of All Things Southern," Rushing Tomlinson, attests to the decline of the current baseball field through the years. "I have images of my husband, Phillip, playing pitcher on that field," she says.

"I spent many a night at the ballpark as my son, Phillip, also played there," says Rushing Tomlinson, who's insisting that her son invite some of his childhood teammates to reunite around the "Field of Dreams" vision and worship event.

“There were so many relationships that are special, along with so many memories of blacks and whites playing together without any kind of segregation,” says Rushing Tomlinson.

Her hope is that husband and son rally around two favorites in Tomlinson households: Jesus and baseball.