

WORKING FOR A PLAYCHECK



KIM HAGGERTY ZYLUS/DAILY BREEZE

Bernie DeKoven, author of *Junkyard Sports*, tosses around hoseballs (socks stuffed into nylons) at his Redondo Beach home.

Redondo Beach man makes a living

teaching people that
fun and games
is a good idea for all facets of life

By Shanna Thompson

In Bernie DeKoven's world there is no excuse for boredom.

The animated 62-year-old has a knack for finding fun in just about anything — from the kickball made of recycled plastic grocery bags he and his 35-year-old son, Elyon, play with outside their Redondo Beach home to the tennis ball wrapped in a nylon stocking that got lodged in a tree after a toss went off course.

The idea of any game should be to have a good time, DeKoven says, and he has made a career out of helping people learn to achieve that.

His latest effort, *Junkyard Sports*, is a book with a twist on traditional favorites such as baseball, football and hockey that uses household items such as toilet paper, balloons and trash cans.

"The idea, really, is that the players are more important than the game. It doesn't really matter who wins," DeKoven said. "What really matters is how much fun you've had."

"That's what *Junkyard Sports* is about — cross-age, cross-ability, cross-cultural opportunities for people to play."

The book, published by Human Kinetics, is a culmination of DeKoven's 40 years in theater, edu-



— Find out more

- Call Bernie DeKoven at 310-792-7227.
- Go to www.junkyardsports.com.

cation and game design, and his lifetime membership in the Association for the Study of Play.

"(I'm) like a clergy without a church," he said. "I believe in fun, and I believe in the human spirit. I see myself in kind of that model of someone who is preaching the gospel of fun."

The first inkling that he might not follow a traditional career path came when the Philadelphia school system hired DeKoven, who has a master's degree in theater from Villanova University, to write a curriculum in theater for elementary school children.

But one day the kids he was working with said they were tired of the usual classwork.

"My transforming moment was when the kids said they didn't want to do any more theater games and they wanted to play Duck, Duck, Goose," he said. "It turned out to be everything that I dreamed of."

DeKoven joined in, saw how theatrical games

PLAY: He wraps up household items to create fun and games

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are, and was inspired to write the Interplay Curriculum, a collection of 1,000 games collected from kids and books worldwide.

When DeKoven began to involve teachers in developing the curriculum and organized an adult game of Duck, Duck, Goose that lasted 45 minutes, he realized the depth of their fun-deprivation.

He bought 25 acres in Pennsylvania shortly thereafter and built the Games Preserve — a barn modified into the ultimate playroom, with hundreds of board games, table games and puzzles. It was there that he taught workshops to groups as varied as teachers and prison guards.

“When I give people the opportunity to just have fun again and play games, there is no barrier between the adult experience and the child experience,” DeKoven said. “Once they discover they really do have the permission, the freer and more open they get and the more relaxed and more loving and more supportive and more intelligent they get. It’s like they become alive again.”

In the early 1980s, DeKoven and his family moved to California and he began designing computer games for Mattel Inc. and Children’s Television Workshop.

But his passion remained in traditional play. “My heart was always in games of the flesh rather than virtual games because so much more happens,” DeKoven said. “It’s kind of the intimacy and the spontaneity you get when you are playing with another human

Fun-loving Bernie DeKoven, right, and his son, Elyon, demonstrate kicking a ball made out of plastic grocery bags outside their home in Redondo Beach.

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DAILY BREEZE



being that you can’t really replicate on the computer.”

Today, DeKoven leads game workshops in schools, hospitals and businesses and coaches people to incorporate more fun into their lives. He also plans JunkFests where

families, corporations and other groups can play junkyard sports as a team-building or bonding experience. In his workshops, DeKoven not only teaches game playing but also constructive and collaborative cheating to make the game more

fun for everyone, and how to quit if a player needs a break. The skills, he said, translate into life and relationships in general.

“A lot of times people get in relationships and they get constrained because of what they think they are supposed to be to each other,” he said. “Sometimes you have to really test the rules, but you can’t test the rules by yourself.”

DeKoven, however, is careful not to obscure the heart of his work.

“The problem is that it is easy to over-complicate what is really a very simple message,” he said. “It is a lot easier to change the rules of the game than it is to change the people who are playing.”

Shanna Thompson is a freelance writer based in Hermosa Beach.