Blessings come in all forms. For four decades, athletes around the area have found a blessing in the work of Jim Byron. It’s a blessing Jim Byron has found in doing the work. It’s a blessing that will continue into the future with the establishment of the Jim Byron Scholarship Fund through the Community Foundation for the Land of Lincoln.

“I was overwhelmed (when I found out),” Byron said. “I was very humbled. It was quite a thrill.” Byron lives in Williamsville and has served as a massage therapist for area athletes four decades. He has done it for free. He has done it for anyone who asked. He has done it while serving as an example of hard work and perseverance to those he has served.

Byron was born with spina bifida, a congenital disorder most notable for a four-inch opening near his spine. It has led to some disabilities most noticeably difficulties walking, but it hasn’t stopped the octogenarian from making his mark in the community.

“He never worries about himself. He does anything to help the children,” said Bill Hahn, who spearheaded the fund’s creation. “If you have pain, Jim will take care of you. He never asks for anything. He felt the Lord gave him a gift with his hands.”

Byron’s love of sports began as a child. His disability was supposed to prohibit sports, but he played anyway. His move toward massage therapist started in 1960 at Wheaton College. Byron was working for the football program when a standout player was injured. His therapy entailed 2-3 hours of massage and other work each day. Byron took on the assignment and the player returned to win Most Valuable Player honors.

He eventually migrated to the Springfield area, working at the YMCA as a professional masseuse. He started working with the Springfield High football team in 1969 before he moved to the Williamsville team. He has worked for over 34 years in some capacity with the Williamsville program, although he stopped going onto the field in 1999. The scholarship benefits Williamsville students.

“I’ve always felt blessed by being a part of the team,” Byron said. “I’ve always wanted to do something special for young people. I’ve always felt the Lord led me in whatever I was doing. And I’m still being blessed by it.”

Byron’s faith is unshakeable. He gives credit to God for whatever help he has been to athletes in their recovery. “My feeling has always been that if there is any healing, God does it. I tell people, if there was any healing, I didn’t do that, God did that,” Byron said. “I believe the touch in my fingers came from God also. I feel muscle spasms and trace them like a road map.”

[continued]
Bryon studied his craft in the beginning, talking to several doctors about how to best approach different injuries. He learned and became so respected that many nights a line formed at his house of athletes and others seeking his services. Hahn and all four of his children have been clients.

“He is well known,” Hahn said. “Anything he can do to take care of you. He has done all he can for everybody. He is a great individual.”

Byron has done all of it without charging for his services. All he asked for was a hug afterwards. He said he and his wife Illa wanted to make sure lower income students wouldn’t be turned away from getting help they needed.

“I grew up as one of those kids and I want to make sure there are services for them,” Byron said.

Byron has reduced the amount of therapy he provides. And while he still intends to walk as much as he can, he will likely soon make a change there as well. “Walking is painful, but if I don’t do it, why should God help me with the pain if I’m not able to exert some energy to at least do that,” Byron said. “Some day, I might not be able to walk but I’m going to be 80, I figure it’s time to ride.”

It’s that spirit that has helped Byron through difficulties.

“My glass has always been full,” Byron said. “The physical disability was a blessing to me. It gave me an opportunity to explain things.”

And he is a blessing for the community.