



Chicago Bear Jerrell Freeman Visits Road Home, Connects with Vets

November 14, 2016

Long before Chicago Bear Jerrell Freeman appreciated how much teamwork, loyalty and discipline mattered in winning a football game, he was taught how important those qualities were in real battles. He developed a deep appreciation for military veterans as a child by listening to his World War II veteran grandfather Sidney Bigham proudly share stories of his military service and, especially, the people he served with.

"I just feel that veterans are so underappreciated," Freeman said. "For what they've done, and what they are living with, they just deserve so much more. I think everyone should do more to show their appreciation."

Freeman is doing more. Soon after signing with the Bears in early 2016, he became actively involved with the Chicago Bears community engagement efforts and asked to participate in the team's support of the Road Home Program at Rush University Medical Center, which helps veterans and their families heal trauma-induced mental and emotional wounds of war. Freeman has donated more than 350 game tickets so far, and many were used by military veterans or family members getting care or counseling through the Road Home Program. When several of those veterans wrote Freeman to thank him for his generosity, he couldn't believe who was thanking who.

"For everything they've done, what are (football) tickets? I could never repay them for what they've sacrificed, going and fighting for us. They're thanking me? It's the least I could do." To do a little more, Freeman spent part of a recent – and rare – visit at the Road Home facilities telling every veteran how much their service meant to him.

"I'd never met a pro athlete before, so it was exciting," said one of the veterans who attended a game and spent time with Freeman. "But when he looks me in the eye, tells me *thank you*, asks how I'm doing and really listens when I tell him.....that was something special."

For all of his special work, the Bears have nominated Freeman for the National Football League's Salute to Service Award that it created to "acknowledge the exceptional efforts by members of the NFL community to honor and support U.S. service members, veterans and their families."

The NFL will announce in January which of the 32 nominees has won the award. But for the men and women at the Road Home Program, there is no competition.