

Donation makes a hit

Daily Freeman, November 26, 2006

By ROBERT MITCHELL Correspondent

Under the hot Dominican Republic sun, it's not unusual to see shoeless youngsters playing baseball all day long on dusty fields. For them, Nike cleats endorsed by Derek Jeter are a dream from another world.

They use broom handles for bats and a rolled-up ball of twine for a ball. Rocks serve as bases. A plastic milk carton is crushed and transformed into a mitt.

Steve Pindar of Oneonta saw such conditions firsthand during several missions trips to the Dominican Republic and decided to do something about it. He and Steve Tremiere of Newtown, Pa., collaborated with the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown and the family of the late Hall of Famer Roberto Clemente, who died in a 1972 plane crash delivering earthquake relief to Nicaragua, to create "Roberto's Kids."

The program collects new and used baseball and softball equipment for children in the Dominican Republic, Clemente's home of Puerto Rico, Mexico, Venezuela, Latin America, Africa and even parts of the United States.

One of the teams contacting Pindar with donations this year was the Hudson Valley Heat, a travel team made up of players ages 15 and younger from several Ulster County towns. The team collected three pickup trucks full of equipment, including 625 jerseys, 150 bats, catching gear, mitts, batting helmets and cleats.

"I was blown away," Pindar said. "It was one of the largest donations from a single group that we've ever received."

The Hudson Valley Heat players went to local baseball leagues and received donations from Little Leagues in Woodstock, Olive and Hurley and Babe Ruth leagues in Highland, Rondout Valley and Onteora. The New Paltz Baseball Association also donated equipment.

The Hurley Little League donated six boxes of new and used uniforms; the Olive Little League gave two cases of new baseballs.

Steve Greenlese, a coach with the Heat, said when the team established its mission statement in 2005, the parents were interested in instilling a sense of community service in their boys.

"It got us thinking about what we could do other than just play baseball," said Greenlese, a town of Olive resident.

The team considered cleaning up parks or local Little League fields, but nothing seemed to fit.

Donna Boundy, whose 14-year-old son, Kofi, plays for the Heat, went on the Internet looking for baseball-related charities and found Roberto's Kids.

"This one sounded perfect for us," Boundy said. "Besides raising (our boys) to be good students and excellent baseball players, we want them to be good citizens."

Boundy, a West Hurley resident, said the collection part was "easy."

"People really wanted to help," she said. "All you had to do was bring it up - and the next day parents were bringing old equipment. We all have used equipment in our garages."

Boundy said that her son wrote a letter to a local newspaper asking for donations and someone who read it in New York City sent the team \$100 to defray shipping costs to the Dominican Republic.

The collection period ran through the spring and summer. In September, team parents and players counted, sorted and labeled all the equipment.

Greenlese said the entire team traveled in a seven-vehicle caravan to take the equipment to Steve Pindar and his wife, Lisa, in Oneonta. Greenlese and his son, Adam, took part.

"Lisa spent the time telling us about the experience of the mission work in the Dominican Republic and what it's like to grow without the opportunities we have," he said. "I was very touched by their commitment to the program and bringing joy to kids less fortunate than ours. It was great for our kids to be a part of that."

"The kids down there are very passionate about the sport. We're helping them fulfill their dreams."

Pindar said he first went to the Dominican Republic in 1997 as part of a missions trip.

"Everyone told me that I'd never forget the trip and that it would change my life forever," Pindar recalls. "I took them with a grain of salt, but both comments were true."

It was on this trip that he saw the deplorable conditions under which youngsters play baseball in the Dominican Republic, which has turned out such major league stars as Pedro Martinez, Manny Ramirez and Sammy Sosa.

"Every story that people hear in the United States (about the playing conditions) is absolutely true," he said. "We saw the need and felt the calling."

Roberto's Kids was formed in 1999, but in 2005 most of the donations were still coming exclusively from his family. About 5 tons was donated last year.

"I knew in my heart it could grow larger," he said.

With the endorsement of the National Baseball Hall of Fame, it has.

"It's literally spread around the world," he said.

"Roberto's Kids has brought joy to those who don't always get the opportunities," Luis Clemente, Roberto Clemente's youngest son, says in the organization's promotional materials.

"In the Clemente tradition of giving and caring for others, it is truly making a difference by touching and inspiring so many lives."

Roberto Clemente played 18 years as an outfielder with the Pittsburgh Pirates. He won four National League batting titles and led the team to world championships in 1960 and 1971. He notched the 3,000th and final hit of his career in September 1972, three months before his death.

Boundy said the Heat players are talking about what to do for an encore next year and have even discussed the possibility of going to the Dominican Republic to play a few games against teams there.

"We also might collect equipment again next year," Boundy said.

Pindar and his wife were so grateful for the contributions this year that they presented each Heat player and his family with a letter that included the following statement: "It is a privilege to partner with impassioned individuals like you who help to enrich the lives of those much less fortunate than ourselves. You have sent a strong message into your communities that you are more than just a baseball team."

Organizations and individuals who would like to support Robert's Kids can contact the organization at (607) 432-7440, (607) 437-8779 or go online at www.robertos-kids.org." The Hudson Valley Heat can be reached at www.eteamz.com/hvh.

©Daily Freeman 2007