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Roberto Clemente Jr. pitches in for a charitable cause

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The thought of spring is always enough to bring joy to any baseball fan, but it carries special meaning for Steve Pindar. Soon, Pindar -- as he has done every year since 1999 -- will help pack up a shipment of used baseball equipment that will eventually find its way to several countries in Latin America. As the head of Roberto's Kids, a non-profit organization named after Roberto Clemente, Pindar ensures that this equipment will be distributed to underprivileged children in the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and Nicaragua.

"We feel very strongly that we're continuing the social responsibility legacy of Roberto Clemente," Pindar said. "And we think the program helps bridge the social gap through baseball."

The quest began humbly in 1999, when Pindar -- who had no real baseball background other than being a little league coach for his sons Christopher and Joshua -- received a call from the local youth league in his hometown of Oneonta, N.Y. The league organizers had a roomful of used equipment they wanted to donate and they thought Pindar could hand it out to kids in the Dominican during one of his church mission trips. Pindar liked the idea, and asked around to see if other leagues had equipment to donate.

Soon, Pindar and his family were making regular trips to the Dominican with duffel bags stuffed with equipment. Then Pindar, with the help of several people in the Dominican, including Rafael Perez -- the former head of MLB's office in the Dominican who now heads the Mets' Latin American operations -- found legitimate leagues and children who had the most need.

One time during the early days of the program, while in San Pedro de Macoris -- where his family had rented an apartment -- Pindar began to play catch with his sons. Several neighborhood children quickly asked to join in. Pindar thought it would be a good idea to bring out some of the equipment so all the children could participate. He handed a glove to a 6-year-old boy, who looked at it as if it were a foreign object. The boy had never seen a glove in his life. "Obviously, this kid had been playing baseball with his bare hands his whole life," Pindar said. "That's when I began to understand the need."

By 2005, Pindar was shipping almost five tons of equipment to Latin America. Around this time he began looking to cull his efforts with others who were doing similar charities. He sought the help of Roberto Clemente Jr.

By then, Clemente Jr. had truly embraced and reveled in his role as a baseball ambassador and keeper of his father's legacy. But it wasn't always that way. Clemente Jr. was only 7-years-old when his father died in a plane crash in 1972. Almost immediately, he was asked to take a prominent role as a family spokesman. It was difficult enough trying to grow up without a father, but to have to do it so publicly was a tremendous strain.

"Every time I would open the door I knew I had to answer questions about him," Clemente Jr. said. "It was always in my face."

To honor his father, Clemente Jr. was determined to make it to the majors. He was a standout athlete in track and field, basketball and volleyball, in addition to being a good baseball player. In 1984 he was signed by the Philadelphia Phillies. He was traded to the Padres a year later, but amassed just a .190 average in three seasons in the San Diego minor league system. A knee injury ended his career in 1989. Despite his best attempts, he would not follow his father to the majors.

But as the years went on, Clemente Jr. and his brother Luis, though they might not have been able to match their father on the baseball field, decided to emulate his spirit of giving. The brothers and their mother Vera, were instrumental in opening the Roberto Clemente Sports City in Puerto Rico in 1992. Soon after they established the Roberto Clemente Foundation, which aimed to help underprivileged children in Pittsburgh. "This is something we do as a family," Clemente Jr. said. "The only thing I know is how to give."

By 2006, when Pindar requested a meeting with the brothers, the Clemente name had already come to represent philanthropy, and that was in large part because of the work of the remaining members of the Clemente family.

The family gave Pindar their blessing, and that's how Roberto's Kids was established. But even then, Clemente Jr. and Luis mostly stayed in the background. It was not until 2008, at the unveiling of a Robert Clemente statue at the Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, that the family decided to take a more prominent role. Pindar was invited to the unveiling, and the family decided to meet with him during a quiet moment that weekend. Mostly, the family wanted to get to know Pindar. For almost three hours, Pindar and his wife Lisa talked with the Clementes about their project, about their lives and their goals.

"That meeting was a catalyst," Clemente Jr. said. "Right then and there we felt we were doing the right thing."

The ultimate blessing came when Vera hugged Pindar at the end of the meeting and told him, "My husband would have been very proud of what you're doing."

Shortly after that meeting, Clemente Jr. became the public face for the project. Last year, the organization, which is purely volunteer driven, collected almost 30 tons of equipment.

"I can't quantify it, but it's huge," Pindar said of how the organization has been helped by

the Clemente name. "I've had people who have donated because we are affiliated with Roberto Clemente. His legacy lives on."

Only in the last couple of years has the organization begun donating equipment to Nicaragua, a sweet twist of fate considering Clemente died while trying to deliver aid to earthquake victims in that country. It was not intentional. Pindar was friends with Ronaldo Peralta -- a Nicaraguan who is the head of MLB's Dominican office -- and he asked if the organization could expand its donations to his home country.

"Taking into account that Nicaragua is the second or third poorest country in the Americas, the donations from Roberto's Kids has had an immense social and athletic impact on the country," Peralta wrote in an email. "The equipment received by the kids has helped their development in youth leagues in this country, and it's also had the added impact of taking some at-risk kids off the streets and into organized educational and sports programs. In addition of helping the kids hope for a better future, this equipment has also helped develop a pool of players in Nicaragua who may one day play professionally."

Pindar and Clemente Jr. hope to expand their donating to even more countries in the coming years. You never know, they could be helping spawn the next Roberto Clemente.'

For more information about Roberto's Kids go to www.robertos-kids.org