

Aug. 20, 2009
The Post-Standard

Lessons go beyond baseball

Roberto Clemente Jr. and Syracuse Chiefs host a clinic for Latino kids.

Roberto Clemente Jr., on the importance of mentoring city children: "You put some time into it, you'll see the difference. It's not about the money; it's about the time, to be able to make them understand that you do care about our future and their future. If you can actually take an hour - I mean just an hour a week, if that - as a community, you can make a whole world of difference, there's no doubt about that."

By Sean Kirst
Staff writer

Syracuse, NY - Roberto Clemente Jr. learned by example. Within any community, he insists, one quality is best capable of changing lives: Time.



He shared that simple message Wednesday in Syracuse, where he ran a baseball clinic for about 20 Latino children brought to Alliance Bank Stadium by Rita Paniagua of the Spanish Action League. Joined by several players from the Chiefs, Roberto Jr. was supposed to spend an hour playing ball with the kids.

It turned out to be more like two hours, and even then he was in no hurry to quit.

"You put some time into it," Roberto Jr. said of working with youth, "you'll see the difference."

His father, born in Puerto Rico, remains a legend in Spanish-speaking nations where baseball is revered. Roberto Clemente, a great hitter with a cannon arm, was also a humanitarian. In 1972, he climbed onto into a plane that was bringing emergency supplies to Nicaragua after an earthquake.

The plane crashed. Clemente was killed.

His son, looking Wednesday at the faces of the children of the city, said he knows how it feels to grow up without a father.

Roberto Jr. was in Syracuse both for the celebration of "Latino Night" by the Chiefs, and to support "Roberto's Kids" -- a program founded by Steve Pindar, of Oneonta, that provides "gently used" baseball equipment to children who need it, especially in Central America.

"To be next to (Clemente's) son, on this field today, it means so much," said Chiefs catcher Gustavo Molina, who watched the children playing catch, then ran into the locker room and returned with a tee. He set it up on the outfield grass, where boys and girls used it to loft fly balls to Roberto Jr. and Chiefs outfielder Justin Maxwell.

Chiefs infielder Marcos Yopez said the elder Clemente represents a model for children in any situation. "The most important thing to learn is to be humble, respect your parents and to do well in school," Yopez said.

For his part, Chiefs pitcher Horacio Ramirez cheerfully showed 7-year-old Chantal Jacquez how to throw a baseball. Later, before Chantal left the ballpark, she offered a perfect summary of the lesson:

"He taught me when you pitch, you don't want to throw it very hard or very soft, but very good."