

Pitching In For Kids' Baseball



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I arrived at work Thursday and a guy was parked out front waiting for me, his Volvo packed to the gills with baseball gear.

It's been that way for the past week for the struggling Roberto Clemente League, which serves 500 Hartford kids,

from age 5 to 16.

A week ago, I told you about how financial mismanagement had led to a police investigation, with the league tens of thousands of dollars in debt and the entire program in danger of folding.

Now, the league's supporters are living up to its namesake, Roberto Clemente, a gifted Puerto Rican ballplayer remembered as much for his humanitarian work as his all-star talent.

"It kind of caught me off guard," said league President Efrain Bracero, a burly warehouse worker whose cellphone exploded with more than 80 calls from Courant readers offering to help. When Bracero took over the league in February, he found a pile of debt and an empty bank account. Then, when he went looking for the league's equipment, he discovered that it had been auctioned off

because nobody paid the storage locker bill.

We found each other on Facebook and I wrote a column. But the story is about different worlds connecting, and perhaps the power of the spirit of Roberto Clemente.

"I appreciate all the help. I thank them dearly," said Bracero. "It means a lot to the city of Hartford as well as to the kids."

There were calls from a representative with Major League Baseball, another guy connected to the Yankees, state legislators, a prominent lawyer who promised a large donation, but most significantly, regular folks from throughout the Hartford area who responded to a call for help.

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Hilary Kumnick of Killingworth, the youth baseball coach who was waiting for me at work Thursday, said he remembers growing up without the chance to play in a baseball league.

"What really struck a chord was the whole league mismanagement thing. Sometimes the adults ruin it for the kids," Kumnick told me. So he collected gear from a half-dozen families and drove to Hartford.

In Cheshire, Dennis Boucher read the column and forwarded it to a few others in town. A baseball coach for years and a veteran youth sports fundraiser, he was astonished at what happened next.

Boucher, president of Cheshire Youth

Baseball, now has commitments for a couple of truckloads of gear, much of it new, with more coming in. He's got hockey leagues and even coaches and schools in other towns e-mailing him and collecting equipment.

"It started in the baseball community and now it's spreading outside of that. This is taking on a life of its own," Boucher said. "This is a case where this group of kids can't play baseball. These people want to help them play baseball."

Heather Lombardi and David Evans told me the same thing.

"If the program stops, what else are they going to do?" Lombardi explained when I called her.

Working together, they split the cost of donating the inventory of a sporting goods store — uniforms, caps, baseball gloves — valued at about \$36,000. Lombardi's company, Barter Business Unlimited in Bristol, had acquired the sporting

goods inventory and planned to resell it. But Evans heard about the league on ESPN radio and called Lombardi, a business colleague, to see if they could come up with a donation.

"It's about giving the kids the opportunity to play and learn baseball, football, hockey or whatever the sport may be," Evans told me, describing himself as an "entrepreneur and angel investor."

"When I heard that, through the misdeeds of a few adults, hundreds of kids would lose the opportunity to play baseball this summer, I decided to see what I could do to help get the kids back out on the field."

The biggest news for the league came late Thursday afternoon, when Hartford lawyer R. Bartley Halloran called to tell me he was donating \$25,000 through the Southside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance.

"I've been very fortunate in my life,"

Halloran said. "As a kid, I loved playing baseball. I'd hate to see them miss out on that."

A number of people mentioned that it was the Clemente name that resonated for them. An outfielder with the Pittsburgh Pirates in the 1960s and '70s, Clemente died in a plane that crashed while bringing relief supplies to victims of the 1972 Nicaraguan earthquake.

"It makes me feel good that we actually have people willing to help these kids. That was my main concern," said Bracero, who told me that Clemente's spirit is an essential part of the league's philosophy.

The great ballplayer, I'm sure, would approve.

For more information, go to Roberto Clemente Htd League on Facebook, or contact Bracero at 860-209-7342 or at Robert Clemente League Inc., P.O. Box 260308, Hartford, CT 06126.