

Reds star steps in with local priest to fight hunger in Lawrence

By Gordon Edes, Globe Staff | June 13, 2005

They make an unlikely partnership in this mission to feed the hungry in Lawrence -- the priest who acknowledges knowing little about baseball and the out-of-town ballplayer who has no obvious connection to one of the poorest cities in Massachusetts.

Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that Sean Casey, the All-Star first baseman for the Cincinnati Reds, thinks Father Paul O'Brien is funnier than comedian Conan O'Brien, who was the priest's former housemate at Harvard and remains a friend.

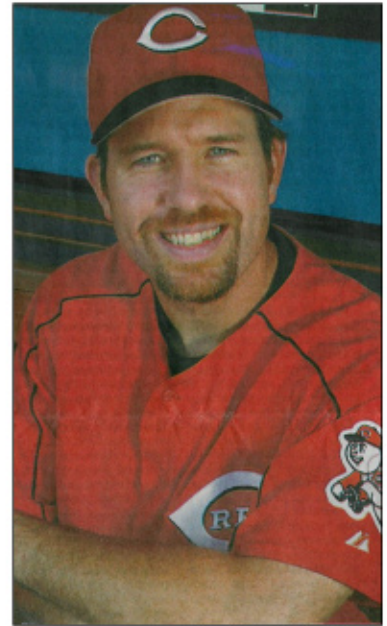
"I'm telling you, if he wasn't a priest, he could have his own talk show," Casey said. "And he's a great cook. He could be a TV chef."

The Reds visit Fenway Park today for the first time since the Big Red Machine snuffed out Sox hopes in the 1975 World Series. That Casey is one of their stars might come as a surprise to the ladies who worked at the supermarket in the summer of 1994, where Casey, a college kid with a broken foot and an uncertain future, was hoping to make a better impression on the major league scouts in the Cape Cod League than he was making in the freezer section, unpacking crates of frozen bagels.

"Those women in the bakery section were incredibly tough," said Father O'Brien, who on a walk down Newbury Street one afternoon that same summer surprised Casey by becoming the first person to tell him he would succeed in the big leagues. "Sean was injured and hobbling in there every day, working the freezer section. At one point, he says to them, 'Listen, I'm in the freezer, I'm injured, I'm really tired. Can I decorate a cake?' They said, 'No, go back to the freezer.'"

Jamie Cappetta is not a ballplayer anymore and isn't a priest, though as the campus minister at B.C. High, he covers some of the same territory. Cappetta, who starred at Concord-Carlisle High in Concord, where he met Father Paul, then played college ball in Richmond, where he met Casey, is the connection between the priest and the ballplayer, these unlikely comrades with a vision also shared by Conan O'Brien, that hungry people in Lawrence will not go unfed.

That is the impetus for a program called Labels Are For Jars. It involves some edgy T-shirts that come in clear plastic jars -- are you ready to walk around town with a T-shirt that has "addict" or "homeless" or "prisoner" stripped across your chest? -- along with a bunch of people determined to see that a new meal center be built on the site of what is



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Jaime Cappetta (left), Cincinnati first baseman Sean Casey (center), and Father Paul O'Brien forged a common bond on Cape Cod in 1994.

PHOTO COURTESY OF FATHER PAUL O'BRIEN



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO JIM DAVIS

now a parking lot in south Lawrence, hard by the abandoned factories of this once-thriving mill town.

"I came here at the beginning of 2001," said Father O'Brien, who once ministered to people with AIDS in Rome and worked with Mother Teresa, with whom he developed a close relationship, in both Calcutta and Hungary before arriving at his current post at St. Patrick Parish in south Lawrence. "And by the end of that year, it was clear to me from my own experience and in talking to all different sorts of leaders in this parish, that hunger was a profound issue in this community.

"You'd never believe it. You'd presume it was exaggerated. The question is, if so many people are hungry, why don't we care more about this? My best read on this is that people who are hungry tend not to say, 'I am hungry.'

"Most people who are hungry in this community and this country are the working poor. Some percentage of people are not working, some percentage of people are dependent fully on social benefits, but most people are working poor. We have a huge housing shortage here, so the vast amount of people's money is going for housing. Then they have to choose what beyond housing they can afford."

Too often, he said, that does not include food. Through the food pantry at the parish, Father O'Brien said, 400 families a month are currently served. Last Sunday, Cappetta said, for the first time in memory, the pantry was stripped bare. Normally reliant on donations, the parish had to buy groceries to make up the difference.

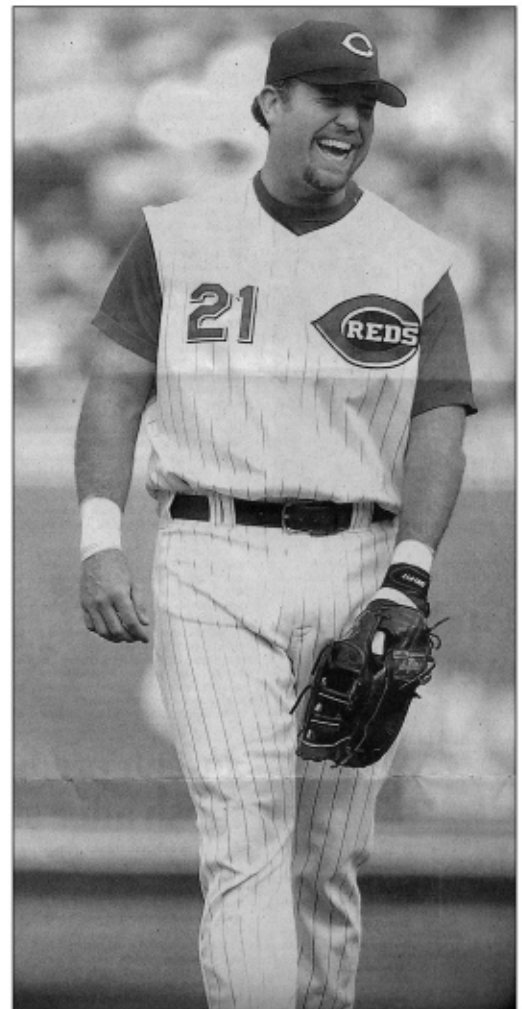
"Plenty of people who are hungry are elderly people, who have an apartment and have some basic benefits, but for one reason or another are getting Grade D tuna out of a can for every meal," Father O'Brien said. "There are some families who own houses here but are so on edge financially, are so totally borrowed out, that they don't have enough for food. Lawrence is not universally poor. We have some very solid working-class neighborhoods. But we bring food to families in those solid working-class neighborhoods every single day."

Pitching in from the heart In Lawrence, according to statistics posted on the project's website, 21 percent of the population, and 31.7 percent of children, live below the poverty line. Approximately 75 percent of school-age children in Lawrence are at risk of hunger. Despite a number of programs in Lawrence designed to feed the hungry, the need remains overwhelming, which is why Father O'Brien and friends conceived Cor Unum (One Body), the meal center that will be built with the monies raised by the Labels Are For Jars program.

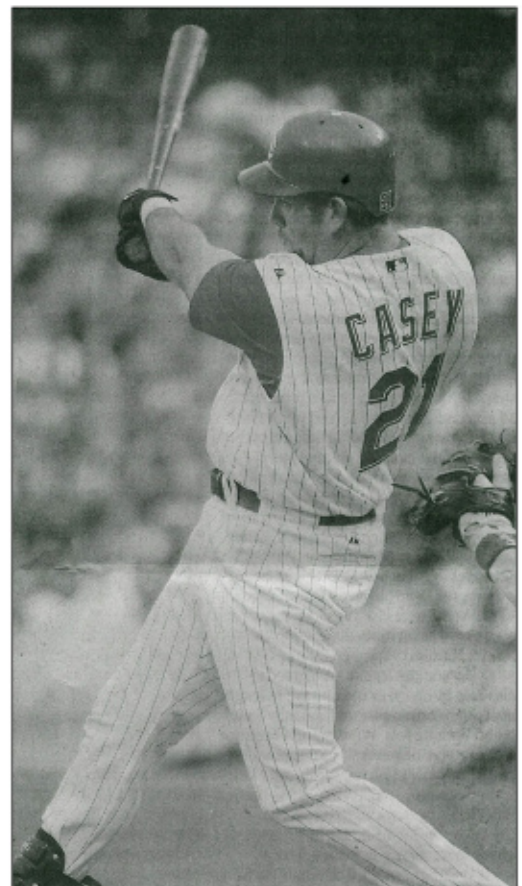
Why would Casey, who grew up in suburban Pittsburgh and now lives in Jupiter, Fla., be committed to a program in Lawrence, to the point where he's passing out T-shirts in jars to his Reds teammates, and making sure they're filling the jars with money?

Maybe if you knew Casey, you'd understand. His social conscience was raised at an early age, when he and a couple of his junior-high buddies were caught shoplifting baseball cards -- cards, no less, of Ken Griffey Jr., who is now a Reds teammate -- and Casey's father as punishment pulled out a dictionary and made Casey look up words like "greed."

A communications major in college, Casey makes Kevin Millar of the Sox look bashful by comparison. His nickname on the Reds is the "Mayor," because he has a word for everybody, including sportswriters, whom he stunned one spring at the Reds training facility in Sarasota, Fla., when he sauntered into the press room, introduced himself and welcomed them, all before even saying hello to his teammates.



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The San Diego Union-Tribune once surveyed the Padres on which first baseman was the league's chattiest. Casey won going away. "Casey takes it to a different level," Padres infielder Phil Nevin said at the time. "He's like that guy in 'Seinfeld,' the close-to-your-face talker. You think Casey is going to lick your face."

Cappetta laughs when describing Casey's exuberance. "Sean's an awesome guy," he said. "An incredible extrovert, but very humble. He's definitely got his feet grounded."

And maybe if you knew Father O'Brien, you'd understand. He might crack wise a little more than the average guy in a collar, but his passion leaves no soul unturned, including Cappetta, who was a senior in high school when O'Brien left a bible on his doorstep, having noticed that he was coming to Mass most mornings before going to school.

And including Casey, who at Richmond found a common bond with Cappetta in their shared faith, and then made a lifelong friend in Father O'Brien, on whom he calls almost on a daily basis, after Cappetta introduced them.

Relationship forged That summer when Casey was playing for Brewster in the Cape League, Father O'Brien would often visit. Many times, he said, they would stay up all night, talking about what Father O'Brien lightly calls "the God stuff."

"That summer is probably one of the best summers of my life, spiritual-wise," Casey said, sitting in front of his cubicle in the clubhouse in Cincinnati. "Walking those nights with Paul, we'd go out to Craigville Beach there and sit on a lifeguard stand and just talk about life.

"I just felt a connection. Did you ever meet somebody and say this guy's different, there's something special about him? This guy had a humility about him, a humor about him. He's a very funny guy, but just a very smart man, and such a good person. Everything about him attracted me to him as a person, and we became good friends."

Father O'Brien, he said, helped give his life some direction. It should come as little surprise that the priest officiated at Casey's wedding to his wife, Mandi, and baptized both of his children.

"At that point," Father O'Brien said, recalling that summer on the Cape, "Sean was dealing with an awful lot of God stuff. In baseball, people go out of their way to say you're going to fail. If you're batting well, they say you run too slow. If you're hitting a lot of home runs, you can't field.

"The question was, can God possibly have a plan for someone to be a good baseball player, and if He did, what would you do with your gift? How would you use it to build God's kingdom? And if people are constantly criticizing you, how do you discern whether this will work out or not?

"I do think God gives people gifts. Do I think God wanted Sean Casey to be a baseball player? I think that's quite possible. And then the question is, with any gift, the way you measure anything you're doing is whether you are using the gift well. It's very simple to autograph some things for charity. It's very simple to be associated with a charity, but to actively do something creative and significant, that's the challenge."

That challenge was embraced when Father O'Brien came to his friends, a circle that included Sean Casey and Conan O'Brien and Mike Toth, whose Concord-based Toth Brand Imaging made household names out of J Crew and Tommy Hilfiger, and Father Paul's brother, Dan O'Brien, a management consultant, and Conan's brother, Luke, a lawyer, and some other talented and committed people.

Their idea was simple: Attract young people, the necessary commandos in their battle to draw attention to their cause, with these T-shirts that turn the labeling in society on its head. They wanted to show that behind "addict" and "homeless" and "prisoner" and, yes, "jock," said Casey, displaying one such T-shirt, there are human beings far more complex, and needy, than the names we attach to them. The idea took hold. Street teams of teens sold the T-shirts to their friends and neighbors; Casey, who could have just written a check, did that, but also said, "I want to be on a street team," which is why the cubicles of his Reds teammates all seem to have at least one T-shirt from Labels.

Relief is in sight The money has been all but raised to build Cor Unum. The Lawrence planning commission has approved the site, and by 2006, it should be cranking out meals. The goal now is to raise the cash to complete the construction goal and sustain Cor Unum, which will have just one staff person and rely almost exclusively on volunteer help, then look to the day when Cor Unums spring up in other communities.

Show him a hungry person, Father O'Brien says, and he'll show you someone likely to be tormented by other social ills.

"Hungry people express their hunger through domestic violence, through misbehavior at school, through joining gangs, through being on edge all the time," he said. "I'm not suggesting hunger causes all those problems. I am suggesting that people who are hungry are consistently involved in those problems, and also those problems are never going to be solved while people are hungry.

"If you're hungry, you're never going to be other than on edge. When you're really hungry, which most of us have never experienced, there's just an all-encompassing depression. It's not just physical and emotional, it's a spiritual depression, just this basic need you realize may never be met. There's a kind of desperation and hopelessness to everything that very few of us have ever experienced."

On Wednesday afternoon, before the Reds and Sox meet in the final game of their three-game set, Casey plans a visit to St. Patrick. It will be the first time he has set foot there, but it is a neighborhood, Father O'Brien said, that Casey knows almost by heart, from listening to the priest's stories, night after night.

"I know that there are a lot of wonderful people there, and a lot of love," Casey said. "And I know Paul loves Lawrence, the people he has met."

There are two full-time priests at St. Patrick, a church in a community that is predominantly Dominican but also includes a mix of other nationalities. Father O'Brien can say a mass in English, Vietnamese, and in Spanish. He stood one recent afternoon in the sanctuary of his church.

"In the middle of this incredibly poor place, there's this magnificent church," he said. "It's the palace of the poor. Our people keep this up, just from within the community.

"Things can be beautiful here. Great things can be done. That's what a parish is about. Cor Unum will do the same thing now, just in another kind of ministry."

To make a tax-deductible contribution to Labels Are For Jars, go to labelsareforjars.org, or write the program at 118 South Broadway, Lawrence, MA., 01843 ■