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Casey goes to bat against hunger; Meal center guests rub elbows with all-star baseball player

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LAWRENCE - Clutching an old baseball glove, the 14-year-old was awed at the sight of the 6-foot-4 inch, 237-pound professional baseball player walking around the room signing autographs and shaking hands.

His heart skipped a few beats as Sean Casey of the Detroit Tigers came to his table and autographed his glove. Then Eric Sharpe's day became unforgettable - he posed with Casey for a photograph.

"I was a lot nervous when I got here," said Sharpe, an eighth grader at Wetherbee School. "I wanted to come because he's a baseball player and I wanted to get his autograph."

Casey, an all-star first baseman, was in Lawrence yesterday to kick off the breakfast program at Cor Unum meal center. The center opened in October 2006 and since then has served more than 45,000 meals to the needy.

Casey wore a burgundy apron with the Cor Unum logo over a black T-shirt with the phrase "Mentally ill" on the chest.

The T-shirts are part of "Labels are for Jars," a campaign to raise money for Cor Unum. Shirts have words used to negatively label people including, "Addict" "Geek," "Homeless," "Slacker" and "Troubled teen."

On the back, the shirts have "Labels Are For Jars" printed across the shoulders.

"I've always liked this shirt. We're all a little crazy sometimes," Casey said.

Casey is a good friend of the Rev. Paul O'Brien, pastor at St. Patrick Parish, which sponsors Cor Unum. The two men met 13 years ago through a mutual friend. O'Brien celebrated Casey's wedding to Mandi in 1999 and baptized their three children.

Five years ago, O'Brien, Casey and late night show host Conan O'Brien, the pastor's roommate at Harvard University, talked about starting a soup kitchen in Lawrence.

"What's amazing is that sometimes people have a conversation and it never materializes," Casey said.

"Here, we made it happen and it's truly feeding people. That's why I'm so proud."

Casey took time to meet with guests.

"I think it's great," Casey said. "God calls us to help those in need. He told us, 'Whatever you do to the least of them, you do to me and when you feed the hungry, you feed me.' That comes to life in this place."

Casey sat down at several tables where children were having breakfast before going to school and adults waited to meet him.

He lived up to his nickname, "The Mayor" for his popularity with his fans and his easygoing style.

He sat with the Brito sisters - Seidy, 10, Aljery, 13, Ashley, 9 and Delaney, 6, - who talked to Casey about the MCAS test.

The conversation changed from math to wrestlers Batista and the Undertaker when Casey sat with a group of boys.

Charles Woodard, 53, of Lawrence proudly wore a Dice-K T-shirt and baseball hat. Even though Dice-K (Daisuke Matsuzaka) dazzled the Tigers Monday night, Casey signed Woodard's book anyway.

About Sean Casey

Born: July 2, 1974 in Willingboro, N.J. and grew up in Pittsburgh.

Size: 6-foot-4, 237 pounds

Graduated in 1992 from Upper St. Clair (PA) High School.

Led the school's baseball team to its first Western Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic League title during his senior year.

His high school number (22) was retired on Sept. 25, 2004.

Received a degree in speech communications from the University of Richmond, Virginia.

Wife Mandi and children, Andrew, 51/2, Jacob, 4, and Carli, 18 months.

Things you didn't know about Sean Casey

Favorite food, buffalo wings

Favorite ice cream, vanilla

Enjoys reading non-fiction. He is presently reading, "No Greater Love" by Mother Teresa.

Musical taste includes alternative, country and Top 40.

Last movie watched, "Little Miss Sunshine."

Nickname is, "The Mayor" for talking with runners while he's playing first base.

Was one of 11 current and former Major League players who recorded songs on the "Oh, Say Can You Sing?" CD in 2005. Casey did a rendition of Toby Keith's "How Do You Like Me Now?"

Baseball highlights

Drafted by the Cleveland Indians in the second round of the 1995 amateur draft.

Belted two home runs during the World Series against the Cardinals, matching a club record for home runs during a single post season series.

Collected three extra-base hits in Game Five of the World Series on Oct. 27 at St. Louis. He is the only second Tigers player to accomplish the feat, after Hall of Famer Hank Greenberg Oct. 7, 1945.

Batted a club record .432 in 10 postseason games last fall.

His .529 batting average in five World Series games established another Detroit record.

Career statistics:

Batting average, .300

Home runs, 126

Runs batted in, 669