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Tiger helps tackle hunger in Lawrence

Bill Burt

LAWRENCE - It was about the same time, in fact the same week when a few life-long dreams came true for best friends, Detroit Tigers first baseman Sean Casey and St. Patrick's Church pastor the Rev. Paul O'Brien.

Casey not only was playing in his first World Series - it was the first time in his nine-year career that he played in a playoff game - but he had the best at bats probably of his life, going an amazing 9 for 15 over the last four games against the St. Louis Cardinals.

"As I was rounding the bases after hitting the home run against (Jeff) Suppan, all I could think of was my dream had come true," said Casey. "I was remembering playing Wiffle Ball in the yard, imagining that I was hitting a home run in the World Series. I'll never forget that."

About 1,000 miles away, O'Brien was having similar momentous recollections. He was opening a brand new building, the Cor Unum Meal Center on Salem Street, a food kitchen for the poor.

"We have so many needy people here in Lawrence that simply need a meal to get through their day," said O'Brien. "I imagined doing something someday to help."

Casey and O'Brien met in 1994 when the former was playing in the Cape Cod baseball league as a University of Richmond student. They've been friends ever since as O'Brien officiated at Casey's wedding and baptized all three of his children (Andrew, 5, Jacob, 4, and Carli, 18 months).

Casey comes to Lawrence every visit to Boston, including yesterday before the Tigers beat the Red Sox, 7-2, last night.

Yesterday's visit, though, had some extra meaning, as an addendum was added O'Brien's dream. The Cor Unum (one body) Meal Center was now open for breakfast.

Casey recalls a conversation he, his wife, Mandi, and O'Brien had talking about feeding the poor in a facility like this one.

"It was about five years ago when we were driving in Florida and started talking about a place like this," said Casey, who stayed at the St. Patrick's rectory after Monday night's game at Fenway Park.

"And now I look at this place and 'wow,' it is completed," he said. "I can remember we were discussing how many people don't eat one meal, never mind three. And now here they serve breakfast, lunch and dinner. This is nicer than a lot of restaurants I've been in."

Casey said he was drawn to this cause because of his friend, but more importantly because he knows the difference between what's real and what isn't.

The adulation he receives at the ballpark, while appreciated and oftentimes necessary in helping him play his best, is not real.

"The fame comes and then it goes," said Casey. "What's real is someone needing a meal. There is nothing more real than that. This place puts food in people's mouths."

Casey, who grew up in Pittsburgh, says his nine-year baseball career has been rejuvenated in Detroit, especially under manager Jim Leyland.

"When you're competitive, like we are, it makes coming to the park special every day," said Casey. "That's how it is in Boston, though this place is crazy. Sometimes you don't know if it's a playoff game or a game in May. Boston is rabid about baseball."

Speaking of which, Casey's name had come up several times over the last three seasons when the Red Sox were searching for a "slugging" first baseman. He often wondered about playing here.

"I know there are a lot of Irish Catholics around here, so I'd fit in there," he joked. "Honestly, I had heard those same things. And maybe eventually. But right now, Detroit is where I want to be. We are built to be good for a few years."

Casey says he knows a few Red Sox players well, including and especially David Ortiz. In fact, Casey says while Ortiz may have surprised a lot of people by exploding on the national scene when he came to the Red Sox, he was not fooled.

"He hit two homers in game against us (the Akron Indians) in Double-A," recalled Casey. "They were so far hit. When David Ortiz was on the field, everyone in the park knew who the best hitter was. He was always a monster. I am not surprised one bit at what he has done."

The same could be said about Casey, who is not your average major leaguer.

"He is special. All you have to do is talk with him and see him mingling with the kids here," said O'Brien. "We couldn't do this without people like him who care and help us."

Casey said he'd like his children to see the meal center, maybe make a road trip from Pittsburgh with his wife and children, even serve some of the needy children.

"I'm so proud of what we've done here. You can count on me," said Casey. "I will be involved with this place forever ... as long as they'll have me."

Consider it done.

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