

Host families make Kernels feel at home

Written by Mike Condon

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The life of a professional baseball player has many challenges off the field, none bigger than finding housing at each stop along the way.

For players whose careers pass through Cedar Rapids, that is not the case.

In a program unique to professional baseball, the not-for-profit Cedar Rapids Ball Club, Inc., has offered housing to each player through the Host Family Program. It's stated mission is to provide a positive home-like atmosphere for young men to live while they pursue their dream of someday playing baseball in the major leagues.

And one other thing - it is rent free.

Lanny Peterson has been involved in the program since 1997 and has been the coordinator for the past 11 years. Linda Mann is in her 10th year hosting players. The love of baseball and the desire to share what they have with young people drew them both to the program.

"Without a doubt, our greatest reason and motivation comes from a very real desire to share with other people some of what we have," said Peterson, a retired insurance agent who is also a Deacon at St. Pius Catholic Church in Cedar Rapids. "We understand that we have many blessings, and this is one way we can help others."

Mann, and her husband LeRoy, enjoy the relationships they develop with the players.

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"We stay connected to a lot of the players we have had," said Mann, who works at U.S. Bank. "We keep in touch with them and hear from them often. It's nice to have young people around the house. There are differences every year, but we go out to the ballpark and follow them just like they were our own."

The program is all done on a volunteer basis. No funding is provided by the Cedar Rapids Kernels or the major league affiliate, now the Minnesota Twins. The host families receive two season tickets, a polo shirt and a couple of scheduled outings throughout the season. They are recognized on the field during Host Family Recognition Night, which will be Saturday night when the Kernels host Peoria to start their final homestand of the regular season.

There are all kinds of stories involved with families becoming hosts for players. For example, Peterson, a former umpire, encouraged his umpiring partner, Tom Pumroy and his wife Abby, to become involved several years ago. The Pumroys' home has been a common landing spot for Spanish-speaking players.

"They have been my go-to family for Spanish speaking players over the years," Peterson said. "I also have another gentleman, Tim Gale, who works at Rockwell Collins and has spent a lot of time in Guatemala and speaks Spanish. It is just one more thing we try and do to relive the stress on the players and make them feel more comfortable."

The bond often becomes strong between house parent and players. A few seasons back, former Kernel Alexi Casilla, now with the Baltimore Orioles, was on a rehab assignment. "He stayed with Tom and Abby," Peterson said. "They have remained very close."

Mann's story is entirely different.

"It's kind of a crazy thing," she said. "A bunch of friends and I always enjoyed going out to the (Cedar Rapids RoughRiders) hockey games and the baseball games. I called the hockey team and asked them about possibly housing a player."

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"They told me I would have to go to conferences at school and things like that," she said. "I was past that point in my life, but I still liked the idea of having some younger people around who could be more on their own, so I called the Kernels."

Since then, she has housed more than 30 players. This year there was a twist. Mann and her husband were recently married and the host family subject hadn't really been brought up.

"He is a big baseball fan," Linda Mann said of LeRoy. "He had no problems at all with hosting players."

The Manns are the hosts for Kernels pitcher Mason Melotakis. Dalton Hicks was also staying with the Manns before he was promoted to Fort Myers, Fla.

"There have been years where I have had as many as five different players," Linda Mann said. "Every year is different. Some years, there are players who want to come upstairs and hang out with me after a game, watching TV.

"Mason keeps a little more to himself," she continued. "He usually comes home and hangs out in the basement. It doesn't matter to me either way. I just enjoy being able to support the boys in any way I can."

Melotakis said not having to find housing was one less worry he had when he came to Cedar Rapids in April. Last season, he texted some teammates when he got called up to Beloit to find a room with them.

"It's a lot better coming to a home than a hotel," he said. "When (Hicks) was here, I had the upstairs room and he had the basement. Since he got called up, I have had the basement. In a hotel, you would be around your teammates all the time. It's nice to come to a home where you have your own space and can do your own thing if you want."

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Melotakis would like to someday be pitching for the Twins at Target Field with the Manns in the stands.

"It would mean a lot to me because I would know that they helped me to get to that point," he said. "They have been here for me and if I make (the majors), they will be part of the reason I get there."

The great relationships happen, in big part, thanks to the work done by Peterson before each season. He spends a week, at his own expense, at spring training getting to know the players and finding the best matches between the players and host parents.

"I make a point of spending the last week of spring training with the guys who are coming to Cedar Rapids," he said. "I do that in order for our players to know something about our program and for me to learn something about them."

Peterson distributes a questionnaire to the players and they turn it in to the trainer. He then meets with each player and leaves the rest to his instincts.

"The crucial thing is that I sit down and have a about a 5 or 10 minute interview with the players and try and get an idea of what they are like," he said. "I know what the host families are like, so I look for compatibility because we want to avoid stress, not create stress."

"If it doesn't work out, it happens," he admits. "There are so many more variables these days and you can't cover all of them."

In fact, one of the reasons the Twins came to Cedar Rapids was because of the Host Family program. Linda Mann credits Peterson with the success of the endeavor.

"Lanny does so much to make this run smoothly," she said. "I do some things to help out, but it wouldn't work without a guy like him handling all the details."

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Peterson's work is far from done once the season begins. The Kernels have had nearly 50 players this season, and each time one flies into the Eastern Iowa Airport, Peterson is there to greet him.

"When a new player comes to town, as soon as he crosses that security line, I want to make sure that there is somebody there saying 'Welcome to Cedar Rapids'," Peterson said. "We're here to take care of them. I make the hotel reservations for them until we can get them placed and we have a great working relationship with the Kernels' staff."

It all comes to an end for 2013 sometime in September. Even when the players go, the memories remain.

Or as Peterson says when told how noble and generous people are for being host families: "We receive much more than give."