Tony Oliva played Major League baseball for the Minnesota Twins for part of 15 seasons during the 1960s and 1970s and has become an icon of the Twins organization. He is one of seven Twins to have been honored by having his number (6) retired by the franchise.

And thanks to the Cedar Rapids Kernels' new affiliation with the Twins this season, Oliva is in Cedar Rapids this weekend as part of the “Twins Weekend” celebration put on by the Kernels. Oliva is the featured guest speaker at the Twins Breakfast Saturday morning at the Clarion Hotel & Convention Center. The breakfast is from 8-10 a.m. Tickets are $25 for adults and $20 for children 12-under.

While the Kernels were in the process of defeating Peoria Friday night, Oliva met with the media. He spoke on several topics, but started by expressing how impressed he was with the Kernels' facilities.

“Beautiful,” is how Oliva described Veterans Memorial Stadium. “This ballpark is like a big league ballpark. It’s better than a lot of the big league ballparks I played in in the ‘60s.”

“It’s very nice,” Oliva continued. “I went downstairs and spent some time in the clubhouse. I wish they‘d have had a clubhouse like that when I played. TV, chairs, everything. It’s very nice. If (players) complain, it’s because they want to complain.”

Oliva confirmed that the Twins organization is happy with their new affiliation with the Cedar Rapids ballclub.

“It’s nice. These are the people who help the Minnesota Twins grow and support the Minnesota Twins for many years,” said Oliva. “We’re very happy to have an affiliation close to home. I know Minnesota’s very happy to be here. I know they’re very, very happy that you guys have these nice facilities for the players.”

Oliva had an opportunity to talk to those Kernels players before the game, as well.

“I’ve been in baseball for many years. I talked to them a little bit about working hard,” Oliva told reporters. “Concentration, listen very good to what the coaches and manager have to say, have respect.”

Not only can Oliva impart the wisdom of a veteran ballplayer who played alongside and against dozens of Hall of Famers, but his background gives him a rare perspective that goes beyond just that of a successful baseball career.

The Twins slugger came to the United States in 1961 as one member of the last group of Cuban ballplayers to legally come to the U.S. from Cuba. He has an affinity for the Cuban players who have had to take a much more difficult route out of their home country, through defection, to play Major League baseball.

“You don’t see those players too often,” said Oliva. “I see (Yoenis) Cespedes and those guys after they get to the big leagues. I sometimes see them in Miami and we talk a little bit. The system is different, the problem is different, the discipline is different, everything is different. They have to make adjustments to be able to succeed here in America.

“When I left Cuba in 1961, I didn’t have a problem because I left legally,” explained Oliva. “Those people coming now, it’s very tough. I’m glad to see all those Cubans have a chance to play. It makes me happy every time I see some of those guys have a chance to play here in the big leagues.”

Oliva concluded his time with the local media by saying he enjoyed getting the opportunity to sign autographs for fans prior to Friday's game.

“I’ve had a lot of fun here because I saw a lot of people who got an opportunity to see me play when I played in the '60s and the '70s,” explained Oliva. “Some guys and ladies come out and come up to me and say, 'Hey Tony, I remember my father or my mother used to come to Twins games and see you play.' That's nice when you hear those comments.”