

From Winning the 1957 World Series to Implementing a Cultural Exchange Program for American and Puerto Rican Little Leaguers

Felix “El Gato” Mantilla, one of Major League Baseball’s and Puerto Rico’s finest, is a long-time advocate for helping youth reach their greatest potential despite whatever barriers they might face. Following an illustrious eleven-year career, including winning a 1957 World Series championship ring as a member of the Milwaukee Braves, “El Gato” retired in 1966 and six years later started a little league on Milwaukee’s near south side. Today, the league serves nearly 200 children annually and is embarking on an exciting new initiative, the Felix Mantilla Little League Educational and Cultural Exchange Program.

The program, developed by Mantilla’s son Tony, supports the league’s goal: To deliver first-class, safe, fun and competitive baseball for youth (ages 4-15,) parents and coaches with a focus on health, citizenship, character and sportsmanship. Additionally, it expands opportunities for children to learn and grow. This summer, (14) nine- and ten-year-old children will travel along with parents to Isabela, Puerto Rico, Mantilla’s birth city. The kids will enjoy a baseball tournament and, more importantly, experience a new culture. Next summer, players will travel from Puerto Rico to Milwaukee.

“A lot of these kids have never been anywhere, and when they get to Puerto Rico they’ll see a lot of things that they’ve never seen before,” Mantilla said. “And for the ones from Puerto Rico getting here, it will be the same.”

Partially funded by the Milwaukee Brewers Community Foundation, the Felix Mantilla Little League is headquartered at the Milwaukee, Wisconsin-based Journey House, a highly respected community center that empowers families in its dominantly Latino neighborhood through programs ranging from adult education to workforce readiness. Sports programs are an important part of the Journey House’s offerings. The center has effectively leveraged athletics to enhance education, character and life skills, nutrition, appearance, parent engagement, and competitive success.

Believed to be the first program of its kind, the Felix Mantilla Little League Education and Cultural Awareness Program will enhance an already-strong and successful little league program.

Children making the trip this summer will be chosen based on both athletic ability and success in their classrooms and community. While in Puerto Rico, the athletes will visit historical sites with cultural significance such as Old San Juan and El Morro, the Guajataca Rain Forest, the Arecibo Observatory, and the Puerto Rico Sports Hall of Fame as well as the ocean.

“Our mission is to move families out of poverty through youth development and part of that is education, relationships and exposure, and this really combines all three,” said Michele Bria, chief executive officer of Journey House. “Even though many of our scholar athletes are Puerto Rican or Latino, they’ve never been to Puerto Rico. Their world experience is right here in Milwaukee. All the different dynamics of the Caribbean and the way of life there is different than here.”

Mantilla, now 81, is known for his 24-year baseball career that began incredibly at age 12 and includes two World Series appearances. He played for the Milwaukee Braves (1956-61,) the New York Mets (1962,) the Boston Red Sox (1963–65) and the Houston Astros (1966.) He also has the distinction of being the only Puerto Rican to have achieved the following: Won the World Amateur Baseball

Championship, 1951; Caribbean Baseball Championship, 1954, Major League Baseball World Series, 1957, started at second base in the 1965 Major League Baseball All-Star Game and was also inducted into the Puerto Rico Hall of Fame.

Among the first Latinos in the MLB, Mantilla faced hostile, racist fans and overcame the challenge of playing baseball in a country where he did not speak the language. Along with greats such as Roberto Clemente, he paved the way for today's Latino athletes. Currently, nearly one in four MLB players comes from a Latin American country.

To help fund the Felix Mantilla Little League Education and Cultural Exchange Program, North Star Providers, a Milwaukee-based philanthropic organization will host an April 2 dinner to salute Mantilla. More than 125 individuals will attend the event being held at Marquette University High School (MUHS). Many generous donors are supporting this initiative. And there is still time for you to contribute to this great cause for our children. For information about supporting the program, please email info@northstarproviders.com, call [\(414\) 378-7408](tel:(414)378-7408), or visit www.northstarproviders.com.