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## Helping Jimmy

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# Helping Jimmy

E. Michael Brady

The hand-painted posters, colored with the brightest reds, blues, and greens we could find in our crayon boxes, were in production. It was a July day in 1960 and our small band of eight-, nine-, and ten-year old boys was making a dozen of these advertisements to tape onto the telephone poles and stop signs in our neighborhood.

All Star Game  
Ellsworth Dr. Vs. Daniel Blvd.  
1:00 PM Saturday  
Baseball Field

The words "All Star" imitated the annual tradition, established in 1933, of big league baseball players and their mid-summer classic. But unlike that famous game we kids watched every summer on television, the one matching the elite players of the National and the American Leagues, every sandlot kid—good player and bad—participated in this contest. If a boy showed up at the ball field on this most important Saturday in the summer, he played.

One of the things that made this day different from the scores of others in our summer sandlot season was that, on every other day, teams were decided only moments prior to the first pitch. We never knew, until we chose up sides, who would play against whom. And even in the middle of the games, if the score became lopsided and greater balance between teams was desired, several players would switch sides. However, on this one Saturday, our sandlot "All Star Game" day, we organized teams according to the two streets on which our families lived.

My brother Steve and I lived on Ellsworth Drive. Our team also had the tallest player (Larry, who typically played first base) and the fastest runner (Joey, primarily an outfielder). We rounded out the team with the plumpest boy in the neighborhood (Jim—catcher), the thinnest (Brian—infield/outfield), and several others of average height and weight (Alan, Brucie, and two Bobbies).

We were matched against a group of boys who lived on Daniel Boulevard, a street that was 100 yards north and ran parallel to Ellsworth Drive. The Daniel Boulevard team sported the slickest fielding player among our entire group (Shawn), his left-handed younger brother (Mark), the most

powerful home run slugger on either team (Frankie), and his younger brother (Ralphie).

We were playing for the glory of victory and bragging rights for the rest of the summer. But more important, we were playing for a boy none of us had ever met and, in fact, whom we knew by first name only.

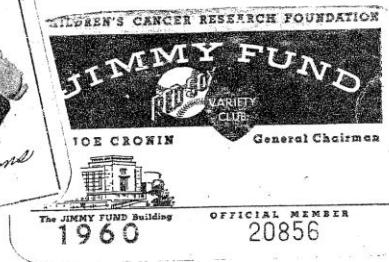
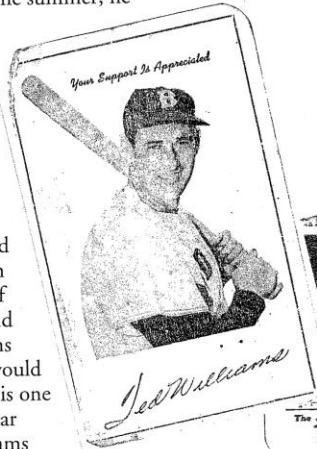
I had heard about "Jimmy" from listening with my dad to Boston Red Sox games on Hartford's WTIC radio. The Jimmy Fund was promoted several times each game. It was, in my father's words, "a way of helping sick kids in Boston and across New England" (few people knew, until several years ago, that the actual Jimmy after whom, in 1948, Dr. Sidney Farber and his associates named the now famous cancer fund was Einar Gustafson, a boy with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, who lived in northern Maine). Joe Cronin, a former Red Sox player-manager and baseball hero from my father's youth, and Ted Williams, the aging current star of the Red Sox and my childhood hero, were both actively involved in support of this cause.

This was the one day during our sandlot season in which our parents and sisters became involved. My dad's job was to help the other boys and me print and post the advertisement signs. Fathers also volunteered to umpire the game (normally we were self-governed) and collect the admission fee. Mothers and sisters prepared snacks to be sold during the game.

We knew from experience that a substantial portion of our revenue would come from the sale of food. And in the age-old tradition of ballpark fare, we kept things simple. My six-year-old sister Karen

helped Mom to bake chocolate chip cookies. Mrs. Roberts and her daughter Kathy, who lived across the street on the even-numbered side of Ellsworth Drive, made popcorn. Still other families contributed peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, soft drinks, and paper cups. These food items were laid out on folding tables lined up in foul territory along the first base line. One of my grandfather's cigar boxes, the same type in which I stored my Topps baseball cards, was used as a cash box.

At the end of the day, when admission and food revenues were tallied, we had earned a total of \$22.50 for the Jimmy Fund. My parents deposited the change into their checking account, rounded up to \$25.00 and, with an



accompanying note, sent a check to Boston on behalf of the sandlot kids.

Two months later a surprise came in the form of a small package mailed to our home. Enclosed were twenty wallet-sized Jimmy Fund membership cards. On the front was a black and white photograph of Ted Williams with a Louisville Slugger bat resting on his left shoulder and, below this picture, a facsimile autograph. On the other side, printed in red, was a Boston Red Sox logo, the words "Children's Cancer Research Foundation—Joe Cronin, General Chairman," a drawing of the Jimmy Fund Building, and a place to sign as an "Official Member" (located directly above a membership number—mine was #20856).

With the receipt of that small package from Boston we sandlot kids learned that it was possible to do both good and well in a single act. I carried my Jimmy Fund membership card in my wallet with pride for close to two years—all the way, as I recall, through the end of the seventh grade. Although stained and otherwise bruised, this card is the only baseball artifact that survived my childhood.

Several more sandlot all-star games would follow this one. But with most of the neighborhood kids moving along into adolescence and junior high school, and those of us who continued to play baseball graduating from 60-foot baselines to adult regulation length (90-foot), we slowly

weaned ourselves from sandlot play. The field itself, behind our small ranch-style houses on the south side of Ellsworth Drive, began to deteriorate from neglect and the inevitable forces of nature. Grass and weeds filled in the dirt area where the pitcher's mound and batter's box used to be. As the seasons progressed our once clearly defined base paths ceased to distinguish fair territory from foul; infield from outfield.

Upon reflection, this event in the summer of 1960 was my first experience in community service. Decades in the professions of social work and education would follow. I suspect there may have been more efficient and productive ways to raise money for charity, even in the era before the invention of sophisticated fund-raising practices. For example, we could have made snazzier posters, marketed to other streets in the neighborhood in addition to our own two, stuffed notices into people's mailboxes, or created a wider range of food products.

But none of my adult experiences in service have matched the magic of this day when we kids, with the help of our families, played sandlot baseball for a cause. Yes, there may have been better ways of helping Jimmy, just as there may have been better ways of passing the time during the summer days of my youth. I just can't think of any.

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