

Hometown Hero: Junior Giants volunteer brings baseball to North Richmond

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In North Richmond, there is not much for kids to do after school, let alone during those long summer months. With camps and team sports a luxury many families can't afford, Contra Costa County employee Denise Carey is teaming up with the world champions of Major League Baseball to give kids a chance to play America's pastime.

"It's important to me that we bring something to these families," she said. "In this community with limited resources, it's important that we expose their kids to what's out there."

Carey is one of the newest volunteer commissioners for the Junior Giants, a Giants Community Fund program that provides free noncompetitive baseball to kids ages 5 to 18. But this new foray is a continuation of Carey's longtime dedication to helping families and children in North Richmond. For the past 14 years, Carey has overseen the Contra Costa County Service Integration Team at the family services center in North Richmond. The center provides a range of services from job search assistance to food and clothes giveaways, all while promoting self-sufficiency, Carey said.

"We are located in the heart of the community," she said. "There is a lot of violence around these kids and our office has been a safe place to come."

That is why Carey started an after-school program at the center in 2004, and added a summer educational program in 2007 and the baseball component last year. A first of its kind, Carey's baseball program -- all run with volunteers and donations -- hosted 25 kids last year. But already this spring and summer more than 120 children, some from neighboring San Pablo, have signed up for the Junior Giants. The first game will be June 15.

There is another Junior Giants league in Richmond, but that is too far for many North Richmond families to travel, Carey said.

For these kids, the Junior Giants pairs well with the summer education program already in place at the center, in which kids read 24 books and take educational field trips, Carey said. Similarly, Junior Giants teaches the basics of baseball but also promotes character development, education, health and violence prevention. The kids will be split up based on age and play one another in a total of eight noncompetitive games.

Junior Giants was started in 1994 as a way to give at-risk kids an alternative to drugs, gangs and crime. More than 20,000 kids participate in 85 leagues, with all of the uniforms, equipment and training -- as well as tickets to select Giants games -- provided by the community fund.

"Denise will become an integral part of the success of the Junior Giants program in North Richmond this year," said Sue Petersen, executive director of the Giants Community Fund. "Because of her prior dedication to youth and her community, we expect to reach more than 100 children in Richmond. We are thrilled to give them the opportunity to participate in Junior Giants."

Contra Costa Supervisor John Gioia, of Richmond, knows Carey's work well. He is not surprised the Junior Giants will now be in North Richmond, or that Carey is commissioner. There is a need for programs like this, and Carey has credibility with the community for what she brings to the neighborhood, he said.

"That's important in Richmond because people can see and feel that she truly cares," Gioia said. "It's not just somebody going to work every day doing a job; she is doing something that's a passion for her."

While Carey's passion may be Richmond, she lives in San Leandro. Before her time at the center, she was a child welfare worker in Martinez and then a manager there. But she says she was destined to be in Richmond.

"Coming to Richmond has been an eye-opening experience and one I have enjoyed and embraced," she said. "Even when giving to the community we are getting it back tenfold."

Besides education, Carey's programs also focus on families' health in the neighborhood. They have a community garden and bringing baseball promotes physical activity, she said.

"The community really respects our work and we do a lot of things that typically a county office doesn't do," she said.

Much of the work is done outside work hours. For example, with the Junior Giants, Carey and much of her staff will be volunteering as coaches and attending the games.

"They are giving up their Saturdays," she said. "That is how invested we are to making this successful."

For those who may not like baseball, there is another way to participate: cheerleading. While cheerleaders may be unusual for baseball games, Carey was asked by kids to add cheerleaders to the Junior Giants program in North Richmond, and she obliged. She is excited about the addition, saying she doubts most other leagues have cheerleaders. For Carey, it's just another way to keep kids safe, and get them off the street and involved.

"It's all noncompetitive and so we are all the winners," she said. "It's important in today's society with so much competition to have a safe place for fun. And it makes parents happy that this is available for their kids."

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