



Pitch and Hit Club ‘Trout’ award sates anti-hunger activist Granderson

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A thinking man’s player, Curtis Granderson knows all too well timing is everything in baseball.

And in life. So when he further expanded his wide-reaching philanthropic activities to raising money for the Chicago Food Depository, free-agent outfielder Granderson hit it squarely on the nose at precisely the right moment.

A huge fund-raiser operated by his “Grand Kids” foundation at John Barleycorn’s in River North on Nov. 13 raised money for the Depository – just at a time the supplemental food-stamp program enacted at the bottom of the Great Recession in 2009 was ended. Millions of needy recipients now have less cash value to spend on food each month, putting more pressure on public and private food pantries like the Depository.

“I just found out about the (food stamp cut) in my trip to the Food Depository, where they introduced me to that,” said Granderson, a native of the Chicago south suburb of Lynwood. “It’s a very unfortunate thing. We have to find other ways to go ahead and make sure people have food in their stomach, especially with Thanksgiving and Christmas around the corner. What better way to go start off the holiday season by giving back to the community by giving food to people who otherwise wouldn’t have it.”

The issue of near-hunger isn’t a lower-class or inner-city one. Millions of middle-class families, still living in traditionally nice suburban homes, have had to resort to food pan-



Curtis Granderson was his usual upbeat self at his fundraiser in River North.

tries and/or food stamps to put bread on the table in the last half-decade. Scores of schools even in the affluent North Shore suburbs report large portions of their student body relying on subsidized lunches, and even informal breakfast programs, to make dietary ends meet. Indeed, such a serious problem in daily nutrition has not been experienced in the United States since the Great Depression.

No wonder Granderson was a slam-dunk choice for the Pitch and Hit Club's Paul "Dizzy" Trout Ambassador Award, honoring him for his philanthropic efforts, to be given out at its annual banquet Jan. 26 at the Carlisle in Lombard.

Activism to help others is widespread

Whether his effort was fighting hunger, giving \$5 million toward the building of a youth baseball complex at alma mater University of Illinois-Chicago, boosting education in the inner-city and backing Little League teams in his hometown and surrounding communities, Granderson has earned the honors of the community in any city in which he lives or plays.

At the Pitch and Hit Club banquet, fans will have a chance to rub shoulders with Granderson, enduring free-agent status for the first time in his decade-long career that has taken him to the Tigers and Yankees. Now his friends and family want him to come home to the Cubs or White Sox. His decision should be made by Jan. 26. Tickets are \$75 per person or \$750 for a table of 10. They can be ordered from Pitch and Hit Club treasurer Bill Motlock at 708/805-1928 or MotluckW@SBCGlobal.net.

"I appreciate the Pitch and Hit Club honoring me here and also recognizing me throughout the course of my career," Granderson said. "They've been amazing not only for the city of Chicago, but baseball and including myself."

He'll address a huge audience at the Carlisle, but Granderson will have far more room to move compared to John Barleycorn. His good efforts have won so much acclaim that his benefit for the Food Depository drew wall-to-wall crowds on two floors. Granderson claimed one of the few seats, testing out some video games during the height of the soiree.



Among Curtis Granderson's wide variety of philanthropic activities was talking for a half hour with a group of Little Leaguers from his native Lynwood, Ill., and neighboring community of Lansing at U.S. Cellular Field on Aug. 5, 2013.

He had plenty of famous company. Athletes from almost all Chicago teams attended. The celebrity list included Cubs icon Kerry Wood, Bears linebacker Lance Briggs, Blackhawks winger Ben Smith, Bulls forward Taj Gibson and Giants pitcher George Kontos, a Lincolnwood native. Cubs and Sox unable to attend due to their off-season residency elsewhere donated their signed uniform shirts for auction.

All benefited Food Depository and eased the strains due to high demand. And the fund-raising for the pantry had its roots in Granderson's original effort to boost education in poverty-stricken Detroit in his early years with the Tigers. Schooling was the emphasis due to the influence of parents Curtis, Sr. and Mary Granderson, now retired as educators. He has added on activism through his years with the Yankees, the peak being a 41-homer, AL-leading 119-RBI campaign in 2011. Granderson slugged a career-high 43 homers in New York in 2012 before injuries fractured his 2013 season.



Kerry Wood, who runs his own active foundation, lent his support to Granderson at the fund-raiser.

Fund-raiser inspired by First Lady's campaign

"It's tied in with the 'Let's Move' campaign with Michelle Obama," Granderson said. "Healthier eating, being active, healthy initiatives. People might look at it and ask, how do food and education go hand in hand? If you look at the classroom, if you miss breakfast or lunch, and you're an adult at a meeting and you don't have food in your stomach, it's hard to pay attention, hard to focus.

"It's definitely an issue for all of us in the Chicago area -- to go ahead and help tackle the one-of-six adults who are food-insecure in the Chicago area and the one-of-five kids who are food insecure."

Granderson's athletic peers were glad to lend their presence and support to the fund-raiser.

"He's one of the best teammates, one of the best people I've been around," said Wood, whose own family foundation has been active in Chicago for the past few years. "His family, his parents are phenomenal people. Anyone from Chicago giving back to the city, the community, the need is there for sure. He's tremendous. Hopefully, (I'll have a chance to) partner up with him and his foundation and do some more great stuff for the city of Chicago."

The Bears' Briggs is not isolated from the crisis going on outside Soldier Field and Halas Hall.



The Blackhawks' Ice Crew provided some glamour for the mob scene at the fundraiser.

some. I went through his website. It's a honor to be here. And (great) for the Blackhawks to be included. Goes to show how good a person he is. It's great to see athletes step up with charities and foundations."

A quiet contrast to A-Rod's press conference

Granderson gave of his time when the Yankees visited U.S. Cellular Field for a three-game series in early August. While Alex Rodriguez drew mass media attention with a press conference discussing his suspension due to suspected PED use, Granderson quietly held a meeting with dozens of Little Leaguers from Lynwood and neighboring Lansing in the ballpark's right-field patio area to talk about the life of a pro ballplayer and how to learn the game's fundamentals. Four days later, on an off-day, he attended the Little Leaguers' All-Star Game in Lansing before re-joining the Yankees in New York.

All the while, Granderson gained notoriety and praise for putting his money – lots of it – where his mouth was in supporting UIC. His off-season home is close by the near West Side campus.

He first gained prominence at UIC before he was drafted by the Tigers in 2002. Amazingly, the Cubs and Sox didn't sniff around Granderson too closely. Although he would have liked to have played at home, he was not emotionally shattered. Granderson told the Little Leaguers in August he actually grew up a Braves fan.

Now he plans to turn UIC into an urban center for youth baseball development. He has contributed \$5 million of his own fortune with the university chipping in \$3.5 million more to build several diamonds and an indoor training center, all of which will bear his name.

"I think the world of any man or woman that thrives in their sport and is able to give back, no matter what they do," he said. "They have the kindness in their heart. I think anytime is great time to give back. Now is a better time than any because it's a (severe recession). What a gift for those who are need."

The fund-raiser also gave the Hawks' Smith some guidance for what he hopes is his own foundation in years to come.

"He came to our game two weeks ago and shot the puck (and putting it in the hole)," said the winger. "It was awesome.

“Getting an opportunity to receive this (Dizzy Trout) award based on what we’re doing at the University of Illinois-Chicago with the youth academy and the youth of the Chicago area, it’s going to be a great opportunity to go into depth on exactly what that is in front of so many baseball icons,” Granderson said of the upcoming Pitch and Hit Club banquet.

This could be very impactful to get tens of thousands of kids to play baseball, in Chicago Public Schools to play baseball, north, south east and west. The main thing is getting on the field, playing, educating and have fun.”

Granderson an architect’s consultant

Granderson has had input in the design of the facility.

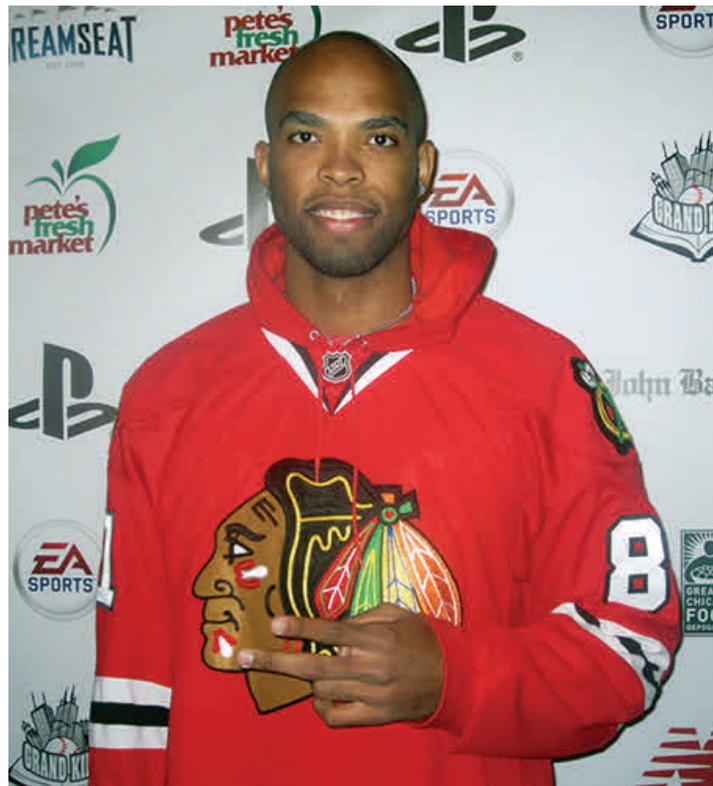
“I’ve already been doing it,” he said. “I’ve already seen the blueprints. They bring me all the designs. Hopefully we can start getting the young kids in there who haven’t done anything yet. Hey, I’m a 4-year-old kid, I’m a 5-year-old kid, I’ve got a bunch of energy, what do I want to do, let’s throw this at him with all the other sports that happen to be out there. But let’s not forget that baseball is one of those very exciting sports kids can go ahead and play.

“It will be a safe environment. It’s on a college campus. It will have multiple fields for all age groups and an indoor facility. Anybody knows who lives in the Chicago area, once you get past the month of October, it’s very hard to continue (to work out). I had a whiffle ball from time to time, I had a couple of (indoor) batting practices, but I can definitely imagine if I had the opportunity to do it more frequently how much better my game would have been at such a young age.”

Despite the millions of dollars already collected, Granderson realizes more fund-raising is necessary for the UIC complex.

“We’re still estimating a lot of figures,” he said. “We’re trying to get support from Major League Baseball, the Players Association, and the Cubs and Sox.”

But UIC officials are happy to have Granderson as point man in fund-raising.



The Bulls' Taj Gibson wore a very-tall size Blackhawks sweater for the fund-raiser.

“I’ve got relationships with those people at UIC, and they’re very excited for what’s he’s done and continue to do,” said Wood.

While Granderson gives liberally of his time in the off-season, he is staying in touch with agent Matt Brown on his free-agent prospects.

The Cubs are not a likely destination because of their rebuilding movement and quantity of left-handed-hitting outfielders. The Sox could use Granderson’s clubhouse leadership and left-handed hitting, but have already been on record about looking at older free agents (he’ll be 33 in 2014) with caution. That doesn’t stop family and friends from urging him to find a way to play in Chicago.

“I had a chance to go to a Bulls, a Bears, a Blackhawks game, a UIC basketball game,” Granderson said. “And at all those different games I got a chance to attend, the number of people across the board say, ‘Come back home to the Cubs’ or ‘Come back home to the White Sox.’ It’s been split among my friends.”

He has ownership stakes in two restaurants in Ukrainian Village, so Granderson gets free-agent advice there, too.

But no matter where he plays in 2014, Chicago will be his home, and his time, effort and pocketbook will be focused locally. In the end, that will be more important than donning blue or black pinstripes.



The Sox's Addison Reed and the Cubs' Starlin Castro were among Chicago players who donated their signed uniform shirts for the fund-raiser's auction.