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Santo Legacy Has Its Day in Cooperstown

By Paul Ladewski

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COOPERSTOWN, N.Y. – Vicki Santo admitted to more than a few tears while she wrote the Hall of Fame induction speech for her late husband Ron, the popular Cubs third baseman and broadcaster.

The words came in fits and spurts, sometimes weeks apart. Other than a local baseball writer who shared some on-field stories, she asked for no assistance.

After all, no one knew more about her husband's battle against diabetes, one that she had fought with him for years.

“It was an emotional time for me,” Vicki admitted to the Chicago Baseball Museum. “I wrote for a few days, but after a while, I found it difficult to stay focused. So I put the speech away and cleared my mind. Then I took it out again and wrote some more.”

Months later, the result was a poignant address at the Clark Sports Center on a warm, sun-splashed Sunday afternoon. It was a message as unique as the physical challenge that her husband had faced on and off the field throughout his career.

In a speech that was remarkably void of baseball talk, Vicki chose to dwell not on his 342 home runs, five consecutive Gold Glove Awards and nine All-Star Game appearances but his real legacy on a much larger field.

“Ron's baseball career shouldn't be overshadowed by what he did for juvenile diabetes,” Vicki went on to say. “What it did was provide a platform that allowed him to raise awareness for a more important cause. When we look back at his career, that will be Ron's greatest contribution.”

Santo was inducted with Barry Larkin, the one-time Cincinnati Reds shortstop.



Vicki Santo addresses the crowd at the Hall of Fame induction.

“Everyone has his own story,” Larkin said afterward. “Everyone has his own network, his own passion, his own problems to deal with. We’re all out there trying to win the game and get 27 outs. We’re all out there fighting our individual battles. To hear Santo’s story and how he was able to get it done on the field and understand the things he went through is incredibly remarkable. And I told Vicki it’s an incredibly inspiring story. I thought she told the story very well.”

So moved was Reds legend Johnny Bench that he put on a Cubs jersey. The former catcher was among several Hall of Famers in attendance.

In addition to Santo’s sons Jeff and Ron Jr. and daughter Linda from a previous marriage, longtime broadcast partner Pat Hughes and teammates Ernie Banks, Glenn Beckert, Randy Hundley and Billy Williams were in attendance.

“My father would have been very proud today,” Jeff Santo said later at the nearby Otesaga Hotel, where the Hall of Famers had their annual dinner. “Vicki did a great job to tell his story.”

If not for diabetes, of which Santo was diagnosed at 19 years old, his statistics almost certainly would have been even more impressive. Fearful that he might not be allowed to play baseball much longer, the team captain refused to make his condition known for nearly a decade.

“That’s a long time to keep a secret,” Vicki said. “Indeed, he was in so many ways a guinea pig.”

Vicki told of the time when the woozy team captain actually hoped Williams would make the final out lest he keeled over at the plate. He was on deck at the time, his blood sugar count dangerously low.

“But Billy walked to load the bases,” Vicki recalled. “Now Ron really had a problem. His vision was blurry and he was weak. His plan was to hit the first pitch, but he didn’t count on seeing three balls coming to him. So he picked the middle of three and swung hard. He did it – a grand slam.

“But as they ran the bases, Billy was jogging, enjoying the moment, and Ron quickly caught up to him. Billy said, ‘Hey, don’t pass me up. What’s your hurry?’ Ron said, ‘You better get moving, Whistler, or I’m running right around you.’ Billy picked up the pace and they got off the field, but it wasn’t until years later that Ron explained why he needed to get off the field.”

Later in his career, as a team radio analyst and double amputee, Santo became a human symbol of the determination required to beat diabetes. He raised money for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation and offered advice and encouragement to countless individuals along the way. Because of his groundwork, athletes found it easier to cope with the disease.

Vicki said that, if there was an upside to her husband’s absence, then it allowed her to

spread the word on a national stage. Otherwise, he would have been reluctant to bring attention to a condition that afflicted him for much of his 70 years.

“We can't let him down,” Vicki implored the crowd. “Walk for the cure, run for the cure, donate for the cure or just pray for a cure, but find a cure. If you want to honor Ron Santo, there's nothing you can do more appropriate than in some way helping to find the cure.”