

Orioles Buzz: Advocates Cardboard to Leather campaign benefits youths in Nicaragua, Puerto Rico

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Any day now, a ship will chug into a port in Puerto Rico and a 40-foot container will be unloaded. Inside are items that will change the lives of kids who don't have the rudimentary basics to play baseball - balls, bats and gloves - that youths in the United States take for granted. Later this month, the scene will be repeated in Nicaragua. Last summer, another delivery was made to Mexico.

Under the auspices of the Cardboard to Leather program started by the [Oriole Advocates](#) in 1992, generous fans, teams and corporate entities have extended the reach of the volunteer organization that promotes interest in baseball in Baltimore - and beyond. The shipments to Nicaragua and Puerto Rico comprise 586 boxes filled with almost 25,000 pieces of equipment and clothing to be used by youth baseball and softball teams that otherwise might not have any.

"There are so many things we take for granted. ... We're a nation that deal with a lot of excess, so that kid that's never been given a new uniform, we're able to make sure we don't go without one," explains Oriole Advocates president Jim Menendez. "We extend the life of baseball equipment by sending it where it's most needed, places where they don't have that equipment. And we're taking the American pastime into other countries. It's very rewarding."

Or, as a recent tweet from the group's brand-new Twitter account ([@OrioleAdvocates](#)) explained: "Old baseball gear doesn't die, the Oriole Advocates send it where it's needed."

What kind of equipment are we talking about? Some is new, some is used. Helmets, bases, home plates, pitching rubbers, catcher's gear, pants, jerseys, cleats, umpire's accessories, tees and other training aids - all are sent to impoverished areas where children don't have them. The program was born from a 1992 story in the Baltimore Sun by John Eisenberg, who described youths using sticks as bats and pieces of cardboard instead of gloves. The late Chuck Lippy, then the Advocates' president, read the dispatch and knew his group could help ensure that balls and bats replaced the faraway youths' makeshift equipment.

Each season, the Advocates hold a weekend collection at Camden Yards, encouraging O's fans to root through closets, garages and basements for usable equipment that can be cleaned up, repaired if necessary and sent wherever it can be used. But the effort isn't a one-weekend thing. Rec leagues and college teams recycle their jerseys to give them new life. Boy Scouts have used collections as Eagle Scout projects and Jewish children have turned their Bar Mitzvahs into vehicles to raise money and seek donations. The collections have been extended to the Orioles' in-state minor league affiliates: short-season Single-A Aberdeen, Single-A Frederick and Delmarva, and Double-A Bowie. Area corporations - from warehousing to logistics to shipping firms - have willingly donated to a good cause.

"This has been a banner year," says Denis Kail, the Advocates' Cardboard to Leather chairman. "If you do the math, it's over 24,000 pieces of equipment and that's really good."

Last summer, Dale Hansen, the wife of former Oriole Ron Hansen, approached the Advocates about sending a shipment of equipment to Chihuahua, Mexico, where the minister in her church performs missionary work. That request yielded 300 pieces of equipment. The partnership with programs in Nicaragua has been ongoing for several years, and ex-Oriole Benny Ayala is the group's contact in Puerto Rico.

"We're already hitting the ground running for the next (collection)," said Kail, who is preparing to start the process anew at Dunloggin Middle School, where eighth-graders use Cardboard to Leather as a community service project.

The Advocates are involved in other worthy community causes - they run Challenger League teams for players with physical or intellectual disabilities, administer the Orioles Hall of Fame and operate a foundation that provides assistance and support for nonprofit and charitable organizations that encourage an interest in baseball. And if they ever forget why they collect equipment for the Cardboard to Leather program, a reminder hangs on the wall of their offices at Camden Yards.

"We've still got the original piece of cardboard, fashioned into a ball glove, hanging in our office," Menendez said. "It's a pretty good reminder."