

06/28/2016 - Canal-based Junior Giants program growing

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By Derek Arild

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Longtime San Rafael resident Kevin Loughlin won't have to lug around so much baseball equipment during Marin Junior Giants sessions. He was able to purchase a storage shed with some of the money his program recently received from the Baseball Tomorrow Fund (donated through Major League Baseball and the MLB players association).

Loughlin, the director for the Junior Giants of San Rafael — the lone Junior Giants program in the county, received a check for \$5,000 during pregame festivities at a Giants game at AT&T Park.

Like the non-profit Canal Baseball Academy Loughlin started three years ago, the Junior Giants program has also blossomed since it returned two years ago.

"We started out working with kids in the Canal, between 35-40 kids," Loughlin said. "We now have 170 kids total. Thirty-one kids from the Canal (23 boys, eight girls) are now playing organized baseball and softball. Two years ago we had two."

Loughlin, a 55-year-old logistics consultant, saw a need to give kids from the Canal area of San Rafael a chance to play baseball by teaching them skills and helping them to register for Little League teams made affordable through scholarships.

"It costs like \$360 to play," he said. "Most of those (registration) flyers would end up in the trash can. Price is no longer a barrier to play in leagues. We get kids to and from games. It's amazing to see the smile on their faces as they are playing."

The money the Junior Giants received wasn't the only reward. The kids got to go see the Giants play the Cubs on May 21. As the check was presented to Loughlin and his players at home plate, they were being shown on the scoreboard and then members of the Junior Giants got to head out on the field to exchange hand shakes with the Giants at each position.

"It was really fun getting to meet one of the Giants players," said Brimdy Chable, who shook hands with Joe Panik. "I probably wouldn't be playing (if it weren't for Junior Giants). It teaches you teamwork, leadership and (baseball) skills."

Chable, 12, is one of the eight girls in the program who is playing competitive softball. She plays for the 12U Morrado Warriors in San Rafael.

The Junior Giants, which runs June through August, has a different theme each week for the kids to learn about.

On Saturday, San Rafael comedian Michael Pritchard came out to Pickleweed Park in the Canal to talk to the kids about bullying.

“We also encourage kids to keep on reading and they receive rewards if they do,” said Bob McGregor, a longtime friend of Loughlin’s and a coach for the Junior Giants and Canal Baseball Academy. “There’s incentive not only to get better in sports, but to do well in school and eat healthy.”

Some of the rewards include a Brandon Crawford bobblehead for reading for 40 hours, a Joe Panik backpack for eating fruits and vegetables and a Hunter Pence notebook for not bullying or using bad words.

The San Rafael Pacifics independent minor-league baseball team also works with the program once or twice during the summer, which includes a visit from Pacifics mascot “Sir Francis the Drake”.

“The program is on the up and up,” Loughlin said. “It’s the biggest kick to get kids to play Little League. They are learning how to converse with kids from Loch Lomond and Peacock Gap. They get to play team sports out of their community and get to develop relationships with other boys and not be so isolated.”

Loughlin is also hoping that Pickleweed will soon get the funding to have an actual baseball diamond instead of the makeshift one he uses with flags, ropes and temporary bases on the soccer field.

Regardless, the program is hopefully here to stay.

“It’s the most rewarding thing,” McGregor said. “Kids didn’t know how to play baseball and now are making all-star teams. Girls are playing on traveling softball teams and kids will be playing in high school. The kids are getting better and better.”