

A Home-Run Humanist
By FRED MAYER
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Jibaros, the mountain people of Puerto Rico, are said to be compassionate by nature, always focused on caring for those less fortunate than themselves. Indeed, this was the theme of one *jibaro*'s life, Roberto Clemente, who died 25 years ago.

During his 18-year career in professional baseball, Clemente earned a place as one of the greatest players in the game's history. He made it into the top 10 in all the offensive and defensive statistics for the Pittsburgh Pirates franchise, collecting more than 3,000 hits and maintaining a remarkable .317 lifetime batting average. But he was also a humanitarian who regularly went out of his way to reach out and help others.

"Babies are dying over there. They need these supplies." With these words, Clemente, at the time 38, boarded a chartered plane to Nicaragua on Dec. 31, 1972. But on the way, the plane crashed into the Atlantic Ocean. There were no survivors.

On Sept. 15, 1997, a statue of Clemente was unveiled outside the Roberto Clemente Middle School in Philadelphia. Standing larger than life at 7 feet 6 inches, the statue pays tribute to the ballplayer, who continues to be an inspiration to the Puerto Rican community.

Johnny Irizarry, a neighborhood leader, can still recall the thrill of watching Clemente propel himself into history as the first Latin American player in the Baseball Hall of Fame. "He wasn't Robert, he was Roberto! — very proud of his heritage," Irizarry says. "There were so many things about him. His skin was black. He was a ceramic artist. He played exciting baseball. He was a humanitarian, a good father. And there was the way he died."

Some felt Roberto was too headstrong. His competitiveness and pride often were mistaken for arrogance. But to the children who can now touch the outstretched hand of the statue bearing his likeness and to the community that united to help raise money to erect this memorial, his humanity outlives the criticism.

There is now even a humanitarian award bearing his name that is given to the major league baseball player who has contributed the most to the community at large. Perhaps Jim O'Connor sums it up best in his book *The Story of Roberto Clemente, All-Star Hero*: "The plaque [at the baseball Hall of Fame] does not say that Roberto lost his life helping people he hardly knew. It does not say that Roberto showed the people of his country, his friends and his fans how to be proud to be black or Puerto Rican. All of these things may not be the reasons that he is in the Hall of Fame. But they are the reasons why we remember him."

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