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Baseball Was My Life: The Stories of West Tampa

By Mary Jo Melone and Art Keeble

TAMPA, A BASEBALL MECCA

You can stand where they stood. You can see what they saw. You can picture the old man who sold deviled crabs at the gate, the gamblers who shouted from the stands that they had ten dollars at stake on your next play. If you stand still long enough on some of Tampa's baseball fields, you can hear the crowds cheering, or, because nobody is all that polite in the ball field, booing. And if you try, you can reach back to the days of El Señor, Al Lopez, the city's first Hall of Famer, and imagine the fantasies he fired in young men who wanted to do what he did, some of whom succeeded beyond what they ever dreamed.

Sure, Tampa made cigars. But it also exports young men with 90-mile-per-hour pitches and arms that can grasp anything airborne and legs that pass in a blur as they fly around the bases. Tampa makes baseball players too.

You probably know the big names and the lore: How Babe Ruth supposedly hit his longest home run here. How two Tampa boys—Tony La Russa (Oakland A's) and Lou Piniella (Cincinnati Reds)—faced off as managers of opposing teams in the 1990 World Series. And how two high school teammates—Tino Martinez (New York Yankees) and Luis Gonzalez (Arizona Diamondbacks)—battled it out in the 2001 World Series, with Gonzalez's hit winning the series. You know the others too—Gooden, Boggs, McGriff, Madagan, and Bell, for starters. Many are left out. Tampa has produced at least sixty major league players who made millions in vast stadiums and who are alternately cussed and praised by sportswriters.

Mary Jo Melone is a free-lance writer who spent many years as a metro columnist for the *St. Petersburg Times*. From Pennsylvania, she attended Barnard College in New York, worked for a while as a radio reporter, and now is a true Tampan who lives with her daughter, one dog, and three cats in West Tampa. She didn't start out as a baseball fan, but fell in love with the stories of the men who made the game.

Art Keeble has been the director of the Arts Council of Hillsborough County for 25 years. Keeble is a graduated from the University of Tennessee with a degree in Journalism. He grew up watching baseball with his father, an avid New York Yankees fan, and collected over 350 1956 Bowman baseball cards. His childhood bat is enshrined in a weaving that hangs in the Hillsborough County Center. He still has his glove and ball.

But these famous men are not at the heart of this story. Tampa produced such an extraordinary array of pro ball players because the city has an extraordinary passion for baseball, and much of that passion began in three places: Ybor City, West Tampa, and Belmont Heights, on city-run fields—Cuscaden Park in Ybor City, MacFarlane Park in West Tampa, and Cyrus Green in East Tampa. The city's social landscape was mirrored at these ball parks. Anglo and Latin (Spanish, Cuban, and Italian) kids played mostly at Cuscaden Park and MacFarlane Park. The black kids played at Belmont Heights. Sometimes the whites played at Belmont, but the black teams were rarely allowed to go to Cuscaden and MacFarlane.

Older boys, teenagers, and grown men played in amateur leagues. They played in semi-pro leagues. They played on weekday nights and twice on Sunday. They played on teams sponsored by Ybor's ethnic clubs. They played for teams backed by hardware stores and dry cleaners. Some got to the minor league teams only to find out they weren't good enough; they would come home again—but they never stopped playing. Still others, as unimaginable as it seems now, flew to Havana to play, and Havana teams flew back to Tampa. Some of them made it in the major leagues.

The connection with Cuba was a natural since Cuban immigration to Tampa had started the cigar industry a few decades earlier. Families with connections to the old country came to Tampa to roll cigars, and the industry thrived in the early days. Tampa cigars were prized by smokers all over the world, and they were made mostly with Cuban tobacco, the favorite of cigar connoisseurs.

But all that came to an end with the arrival of Castro in 1959. The decline of Tampa's baseball leagues was set in motion. Television and air-conditioning let people stay inside and away from the clammy night. Suburbs sprouted, and ball players, who were beginning to have their own families, had a chance to move to the new suburbs, providing their children more than they ever had, except the love of the game.

Sadly, though, you should know that as you read this and examine the photographs, you're getting just fragments of a much larger story. Teams of Ybor City cigar workers were playing Anglo teams almost as soon as the cigar workers arrived in the late 1880s. This passion for baseball is a century-old Tampa tradition.

Baseball was first organized in Tampa in 1878 by Thomas P. Crichton, son of Tampa's Civil War–era mayor. The only players wearing gloves were the pitcher and the catcher. The games were free since expenses were paid by merchants and other businesses. Teams from other towns, especially Sanford and Jacksonville, would play in Tampa and draw sizeable crowds.

As the sport grew in popularity, it offered an easy, if not inexpensive, marketing opportunity. More and more businesses started fielding teams. As diverse as Tampa's population was, teams came from such places as Columbia Coffee, Empire Body Shop, Vogue Cleaners and Laundry, and Popular Bakery.

In 1938, the Intersocial League was formed in Ybor City to play in Cuscaden

Hillsborough County Collection, Tampa Bay History Center

This photograph, taken in 1885, is one of the earliest known images of a Tampa baseball team. Note the three different lettering styles for 'Tampa'.

Park. The league was comprised of local social clubs—the Italian Club, the Cuban Club, the Centro Asturiano, and the Loyal Knights. Games were on Sunday afternoons, and, after lights were put in some years later, on Thursday nights. The games would draw as many as two thousand during regular season and up to four thousand in the playoffs.

Wes Singletary writes that many of the players were Italians who went to military service by 1943. As a result, the teams changed as did coaching and management. Marcelo Maseda played for Centro Asturiano but took the manager role with the Knights, but not for long. A new man named Louis Piniella became leader. His brother-in-law, Joe Magadan, joined him. If those names sound familiar, it's because their sons became two of Tampa's most popular major league players—Lou Piniella and Dave Magadan.[1]

It is probable that more professional baseball players came from the Intersocial

[1] Wes Singletary, "The Inter-Social League: 1943 Season", *Sunland Tribune*, vol. XVIII (Tampa: Tampa Historical Society, November 1992), 82.

League than any league anywhere. A reasonable list would be Al Lopez, Lou Piniella, Bucky De La Torre, Benny Fernandez, Bitsy Mott, Faustino Casares, Manuel Seone, Joe Benito, Joe Moran, Lou Garcia, Monty Lopez, Jesus Corrales, Roland Acosta, Fermin Montes de Oca, Joe Tomlinson, Bob Dowling, Bob Lavendera, Lenny Pecou, Jack Henry, Eloy Fernandez, Sam Sinardi, Mike Dominguez, Ernest Rubio, Chelo Castillo, Sindo Valle, Raymond Rodriguez, Robert Guerra, Chip Clemente, Indio Jiminez, Bobby Cline, Indio Prieto, Peaches Hernandez, and Manuel Onis.[2]

The Chicago Cubs moved their spring training site to Tampa in 1913, and they stayed until 1916. The Boston Red Sox came in 1919, the Washington Senators in 1920, the Detroit Tigers in 1930, the Cincinnati Reds in the 1940s, and the Chicago White Sox in the 1950s. The New York Yankees came in 1996 and never left.[3]

Here are the stories of many of the players who created Tampa's astonishing baseball legacy. Let's get started. Let's play ball.

TAMPA SMOKERS

The name and the image will be with us forever: the red and white jersey, with the final curve of the last *s* in the Tampa Smokers' name trailing to the left like smoke, and imprinted on the smoke, a cigar. If you are devoted enough and have the money, you can buy a copy of the jersey on the Web for the stiff price of $173.68. How they calculate the price down to the penny is anybody's guess.

Other teams, and other moments, may be better remembered than the Smokers: think of Babe Ruth knocking out that celebrated home run at Plant Field, of course, or Johnny Bench, years later, crouched behind the plate at Al Lopez Field. But no team is so identified with Tampa. Lopez started his baseball career with the team in 1925. He was all of sixteen. Suddenly he was making $150 a month. "I couldn't believe it," he later said. "I would have played for nothing."[4]

The Smokers played off and on again for twenty years between 1919 and 1954. As with the Tampa Bay Rays now, we're accustomed to having a pro team to root for. Back then, it was the Smokers, and only the Smokers. The team packed as many as eight thousand people into the stands at Plant Field, where the University of Tampa stands today. In the last years of the team, between 1947 and 1954, the Smokers played a 140-game season from April through September in the Florida International League. The league included teams from St. Petersburg, Lakeland, Miami, Miami Beach, Ft. Lauderdale, West Palm Beach, and finally, Havana. There was no rivalry like the rivalry with Havana. So many people here were of Cuban descent that loyalties were fiercely divided and debated. Passions ran so high that the

[2] List provided by the *Tampa Tribune* Sports Department, Tampa Bay History Center Collection.
[3] Kevin M. McCarthy, *Baseball in Florida* (Sarasota: Pineapple Press, 1996), Appendix D, 223.
[4] Singletary, "The Early Career of Al Lopez", *Tampa Bay History*, Spring/Summer 1994 (Tampa: University of South Florida, Department of History, 1994), 8.

Courtesy of the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System

The Tampa Smokers baseball team pose together at Plant Field at the beginning of the 1924 season. A young man named Al Lopez would join the team the following year.

field had to be roped off from the stands so fans wouldn't go dashing onto it.

Charlie Cuellar, a Smokers' pitcher, was a Cuban native, and he knew how tough the Cubans could be. But, on one steamy day in 1947, Cuellar led the Smokers, and their fans, to their feet, when he pitched a shut-out against the Cubans, as the Cubans had just done to them. The Smokers won 5-0. "It was really such a big rivalry. The Tampa fans later rewarded me with a special day, and the team gave me an engraved watch for the victory."

The Tampa fans had other passions, the rich stuff that is also part of the city's history. Another Smoker, Bitsy Mott, recalled, "People would sit out behind right field and gamble. They would bet money on every pitch and every batter and everything."

The Smokers were a professional team, unaffiliated with any major league organization, although some of its players did go on to the majors. The team disbanded in 1954, when the Cuban team pulled out of the league. The Cubans had just about the best team in league, remembers Lou Garcia, who played in one spring training with the Smokers. With the Cuban team gone, interest in the Smokers simply faded.

LITTLE LEAGUE HISTORY

Little League baseball began in 1939 in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Carl Stotz wanted a sport for boys to teach them fair play and teamwork. The first teams were sponsored by local businesses—Jumbo Pretzel, Lycoming Dairy, and Lundy Lumber. In the first game, played on June 6, 1939, Lundy Lumber defeated Lycoming Dairy 23-8, but Lycoming came back to win the season. From that humble beginning, Little League baseball grew to almost 200,000 teams in every U.S. state and over eighty countries around the world. In 2007, there were more than 2.3 million players worldwide.

Little League baseball is divided into six divisions based on the age of the players: Tee Ball (ages five to eight), Minors (ages seven to nine), Little (ages nine to twelve), Junior (ages thirteen to fourteen), Senior (ages fourteen to sixteen) and Big (ages sixteen to eighteen).

The best-known event in Little League is the annual Little League Baseball World Series, held every August in Williamsport, although there are world series games for Junior, Senior, and Big leagues as well. In 1953, the Little League World Series was televised for the first time, with Jim McKay providing the play-by-play for CBS television and Howard Cosell for ABC radio. By 1955, there was a Little League organization in each of the forty-eight states. George W. Bush played as a catcher for the Cubs of the Central Little League in Midland, Texas, the first Little League player to become president of the United States.

WEST TAMPA COMES ALIVE

The boys of summer made it their passion, and some great players came from those early days. But there was nothing like the passion that grew in West Tampa. Being locked in a neighborhood and not eligible for other leagues, West Tampa Little League grew like a fever once a few dedicated people put their muscle and money into making a team of their own.

The players for the West Tampa Little League were sons of cigar workers, plumbers, mail carriers, electricians, and a couple of former baseball players from the minor leagues. Wives and mothers were part of the team as well, cooking for and feeding the people who built the little playground. They were fans of Al Lopez, Tampa's most revered baseball star and were determined to make a place for themselves in the story of baseball in Tampa.

With a stolen brick or two, a long weekend of laying concrete and building bleachers, a home-cooked hot dog, a borrowed ice chest, a community meeting, a couple of men who wanted it more than anything, and a bunch of kids who had no idea what was ahead of them, West Tampa baseball was born. It was the 1960s, when most of the country was organizing into highly polarized political groups, Elvis was the king, and Vietnam was on everyone's mind. Not so in West Tampa. Parents there had a plan for their kids, and it was baseball, family, neighborhood, and baseball. There was no question that an eight-year-old boy wouldn't play, or try to play, baseball.

The ball park had been there, right next to MacFarlane Park, since 1916, but by the 1960s, it was seldom used. It was a sandy, overgrown wasteland that had been ignored for years. Negligence had left it for dead as the neighborhood grew and lived around it. When the baseball fever struck in West Tampa, the neglected field became a garden waiting to be tilled. And tilled it was. The seeds of West Tampa Little League were sown. From those beginnings, that little park—which has grown into four fields—has spawned some of baseball's most honored players.

A LEGEND IS BORN: FRANK CACCIATORE

"You know what? Those were the best years of our lives. All the Little League years we spent over there at the park. I could have rented this house, because we lived over there."

– Alice Cacciatore, wife of Frank Cacciatore

Frank Cacciatore grew up a few houses away from Ybor City's Cuscaden Park, where the Intersocial League played. The league was *the* place to play in the 1930s and 1940s, but Frank had other ideas. "We had another league; we called it the municipal league. We used to play on Sunday mornings. I played in the municipal league because the Intersocial played on Sunday afternoons. And we used to have what we called tea dances on Sunday afternoons at the Centro Español ballroom in Ybor City, where Centro Ybor is now. And that's where I met my wife.

"The dances were from four to eight, with a big band like Don Francisco, and that's where you went to meet girls, and so I opted to play in the municipal leagues so I could play in the mornings, and then I could still go to the tea dances."

But if Frank Cacciatore ever had the idea that baseball would take a back seat in his life, the thought didn't survive the years. It was 1962. His nephew couldn't play baseball in the Bayshore Little League because he didn't live in the neighborhood. He had a friend, Frank Mendez, whose son was playing in Riverside Little League, also outside of West Tampa. They started talking to each other. Then they talked to the man who oversaw all of Tampa Little League. He told Frank Cacciatore and Frank Mendez to hold a meeting, organize themselves. "So I made the pamphlets," Frank Cacciatore recalls, "and Frank passed them out to the schools around here. We got to the meeting—we had about sixty people that showed up, and I was embarrassed because I thought we would have three hundred people, and I kind of apologized to [the league official], and he told me, 'Man, you got a great crowd here.' He said, 'organize right now.'"

By then they had already hooked up with Tapi Rodriquez, the mailman who had his finger in every community organization in the neighborhood. He was West Tampa's de facto mayor. "Tapi agreed that if he would become president, that he would drop all other organizations that he belonged to and would concentrate on Little League. So we made Tapi president, and Frank Mendez became vice president, and I became the player agent. I was the one who organized all the meetings for the

Courtesy of the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System

This is the uncropped image from the cover of this year's journal. Fans found seating wherever they could during games in this era.

registration of the league. And so we had registrations and so forth. I had to check all the birth certificates, to make sure that they were all Little League age, and that they lived in the boundaries."

Then they had to find a field. "We were going to get this little park behind the Armory. Now they call it Vila Brothers Park. We could have only put up one field in there, but it happened that MacFarlane had a diamond there. The municipal league used to play ball in that diamond."

And so, after some discussion, West Tampa got its baseball field, across Spruce Street from MacFarlane Park. The rest was up to the parents of West Tampa Little League.

"We never had a lack of people to do work. That never happened here," Cacciatore remembers. Strangers couldn't figure out why. He once sat down with some people with Tampa Bay Little League, now a power league in the city. "I said, "look, how much do you charge for registration? They said, 'Twenty-five dollars.' Well, twenty-five dollars back in that time was a lot of money. You got three kids, that's seventy-five dollars. We used to charge one dollar, and we used to forfeit the registration if they didn't have it. We used to give them a slip of paper, you know, what can you do to help us? They felt kind of obligated. Can you work the concession

stand, can you do carpentry work, can you lay blocks? We looked at the form, and we needed a block layer, well, here's a guy who can lay blocks. And we'd say, 'Hey, listen, we're going to build the dugouts, and we need somebody to lay blocks,' and he says, 'Okay, I'll be there.' He gave his Sunday to laying blocks."

For the backstop at the Little League field, there was an abandoned tennis court at MacFarlane Park. Frank and his comrades took all the wire that surrounded the court, Tapi took it to his buddies at Southeast Galvanizing to be reglazed for free, and there was the backstop. It was a little unusual since it was chain-link and the holes were smaller and the wire was thicker than a normal baseball backstop. But the price was right. The league was off and running.

"We organized in 1962, and believe it or not, we played for the district championship that year. We played with North Seminole, which was a big league, big program. They beat us in the finals. So West Tampa was from the very beginning becoming popularized. From then on, we were kind of a power.

"In 1968, I took the team to the World Series, it was the senior team, and we finished second." His son, Frank—now a hitting coach for a Philadelphia Phillies farm club in Reading, Pa.—was the pitcher, who ran into a serious patch of bad luck. "He got a splinter in his foot playing around here. But he never said anything. So when we're at the World Series, all of a sudden his foot swells up, the foot got infected, and [the doctor] had to lance it, to get the splinter out.

"This threw out our whole pitching rotation. We had to start with a thirteen-year-old. He was a thirteen-year-old playing with fifteen-year-olds. He was kind of wild, and we lost a game on account of that, so we got in the losers' bracket. So we fought our way out of the losers' bracket all the way to the winners' bracket, to the finals. We played this team from New York. They had a pitcher that pitched against us—he became a quarterback for the Chicago Bears. Like I said, we fought our way to the finals, but we lost six to four." His belief that West Tampa was the best team in the series has never faded.

Along the way, there were spaghetti dinner fund-raisers. There wasn't much order then, not many rules. Kids would sell tickets to the spaghetti dinners and give the money to their coaches, who handed it over to Frank Cacciatore. That's how West Tampa Little League finally got a bank account. "I used to have a golf sock, and I used to stick the money in my golf sock and throw it in the trunk. I said, 'I think I have quite a bit of money stuck in that sock.' We got it on the kitchen table, and it was six hundred, seven hundred dollars. I had this much money and I didn't even know it. She [his wife, Alice] went and opened an account for West Tampa Little League at Central Bank."

It was just one more sign of how important an institution the league had become. The moms—many of them side by side with high school girlfriends who had not left the neighborhood—formed their own auxiliary. One woman, who banged away with a cowbell during games, had her own method of working the stands. Says Cacciatore: "She would stand there in front of you and wouldn't move

until you gave money. One time we were having a tournament, and she picked up $155. Man, that was incredible!"

There were other incredible events at West Tampa Little League. Tino Martinez, Luis Gonzalez, and Fred McGriff all played there at the same time. Frank Cacciatore remembers Martinez the best: "I saw Tino hitting when he was fourteen years old, and I said, 'You can't teach that.' He had natural ability. And I played softball with Tino's father, he was a softball pitcher, and although his father knew baseball, he didn't know enough to teach Tino to hit that way."

Frank Cacciatore worked for West Tampa Little League for twenty-six years, until 1990. The years passed, the playing fields languished, but no longer. Younger men, with baseball memories, have taken the place of Frank Cacciatore and are working now to revive what he and so many others built.

I ANNOUNCED THE GAMES: MARK BEIRO

Mark Beiro is now fifty-eight and legally blind. Diabetic retinopathy has robbed him of his sight. But his memories of West Tampa Little League are as vivid and detailed as a photograph. Baseball, baseball, baseball. In West Tampa, Little League was everything. Picture this:

Mark is standing in the shade of a press box that was built on top of the concession stand by the fathers of West Tampa Little League. He is, as he would say, a snot-nosed kid—all of thirteen, and he's announcing the game, not just identifying the players or keeping score. He's got his mouth poised in front of the big microphone, and he's doing play-by-play, just the way they did it in the major leagues. As his voice booms across the field, he looks and sees mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandmothers and grandfathers, cheering on their kids.

This was in the 1960s. Families were strong. Parents paid attention. Children who stepped out of line knew punishment was coming at home. But that was home. The streets were alive with the shouts of children playing the game of games. Beiro remembers: "Since we were old enough to walk, wear a glove and swing a bat, I think, everybody in our neighborhood, that's what we did. Baseball was our pastime. It didn't have to be America's. It was West Tampa's.

"Summertime, we would say that was our first home—we just ate at home," Beiro says. "We were into the game, we knew the science of the game, we knew where we had to be in any particular game situation. Our head was in the game."

But some players were better than others. Mark Beiro knew pretty soon he was one of the others.

"I couldn't hit a ball if you put it on a tripod," he said. "I played second base, I could play the outfield, but I had no arm. I wasn't a particularly good hitter…I was OK. Speed was my thing, I was very fast. Most guys would get thrown out on a grounder, but I could run it out. I didn't get very many hits. I think I only had one home run in my life."

"The people I grew up with and shared baseball on the field made me what I

am today. I knew I could never play on the same level as those guys."

West Tampa baseball didn't begin until 1962. Before that, Wellswood had the team, and West Tampa kids had to go there to play. "I was ten years old in 1961, and we were playing city recreation baseball in a local park. It was called RYL—Recreational Youth League—and it made you feel grown up to say, 'I play RYL.'" All the kids would report to the park, the park director would put together a team, cram them into three cars, and go to playgrounds around the city to play another RYL.

There was a field next to MacFarlane Park. But it wasn't Little League yet; it was just a ball field. Kids of all sorts played, and neighbors would come with lawn chairs to watch these no-name teams. Parents didn't have anything else to do, so they would come to that park to watch kids play. Nowhere else in the city did that happen. "We used to ask, 'Who are these people out here?' Someone would say, 'Oh, that's my grandfather, my grandmother.' Nowhere else."

In order to play organized baseball, the West Tampa kids went to Wellswood. They got uniforms. Fathers in West Tampa like Tapi Rodriquez, Jack Russo, Frank Mendez, and Frank Cacciatore got together and created something magical—West Tampa Little League.

One off-night, there was a gathering at the ball field. The stands were full since letters had been sent inviting people to the meeting. Tapi Rodriquez went to a microphone at the pitcher's mound and announced that the league needed to have a spaghetti dinner as a fund-raiser. "A grocer would stand up and say, 'I donate five pounds of ground meat.' Another person, [from] Alessi Bakery, said, 'We'll donate the desserts.' A printer would say, 'I'll print the tickets,' and someone else said, 'I'll buy an ad on the back of the ticket.' Everything's donated—all these businesses, they were involved. We were lucky, and when it was all over, the Sunday afternoon of the dinner, the park would be filled with cars of people."

"I was so bad that I didn't even make the Little League Majors…eleven- and twelve- year-olds. Nine- and ten-year-olds played in the Minors. There was one twelve-year-old on my team who could hit home runs like Babe Ruth, so we won a lot of games." Later on, leagues were created for kids from thirteen to fourteen and from fifteen to sixteen. Beiro played with John Tamargo, who went on to play with the St. Louis Cardinals and the San Francisco Giants. He was the only one from Beiro's age group who made it big.

When he was twelve, Beiro put down the bat and picked up the big microphone of the stadium's public address system. "I always wanted to be an announcer, anyway," he said. He'd listened to major league announcers at night at home on the radio, and he decided he could do what they did. He didn't just do the score. He did the play-by-play for the action on the Little League field. The kids loved it. Not so some of the adults. "Hey, shut up!" one of the coaches said. "Why are you doing play-by-play on the PA? People can see what's going on. What's the matter with you?"

Generally, one of the fathers would simply announce who was batting and their position. Another father would keep the box score. That was it. "At first, I put

Baseball cards courtesy of Graham Kite-Powell

A few of the more famous men to come out of West Tampa and make it at the Major League level. Over seventy Tampa natives have played in the majors since Al Lopez's debut in 1928.

the scores up on the big board. I got a free soda and hot dog. I would tally the scores as the game was going on, which no one else did. I went to a father, George Ramos, and asked if I could at least try doing the announcing. He talked to someone and thought it was a good idea. Danny Henriquez was an older boy who was announcing so I asked if I could help him. He was Wally Cleaver, and I was the Beaver. He asked if I wanted to try and that was it. We became best friends. We joked and laughed all the time. His sister and I were voted Wittiest Girl and Boy in ninth grade."

Even at that young age, Beiro had his radio announcer heroes—Harry Caray and Jack Buck. His house on Dewey Street was very close to the one next door, and the bedroom windows were beside each other. His bedroom was near that of two buddies who lived next door. They would listen to baseball games at night and yell back and forth to one another. "Hey," one of the parents would yell, "you guys go to sleep." But they would continue to talk until plans were made for playing ball the next day.

His favorite team was the Chicago White Sox because of Al Lopez. "When I was a boy, in my house and in my neighborhood…Al Lopez was everything. If Al Lopez could do what he did, we could do it. He was our patron saint. It was the way

he conducted himself. Mayor Sandy Freedman said at the dedication of Al Lopez Park that of all the men she had met in her public life, Al Lopez was the only name who evoked no adverse reaction. He never looked for adulation. My father used to call me over to the radio and say, 'Come here, son, Al Lopez is managing.'"

"Al was everything a person should be, his gentlemanly ways, his love of family, his love of community, his loyalty to friends. Every one of these are things that were bestowed on all of us as kids. Everyone who knew him and everyone who knew of him revered Al Lopez. If you talk to Lou Piniella and Tony La Russa, they will have nothing but reverence for Al. When they were growing up, their parents took them to meet Al Lopez. My proudest moment in sports talk radio was interviewing Al Lopez."

Mark finally impressed the critics. He was a little crazy, but it helped. "I used to get me two speakers and walk up the ladder [to the press box] like a moron, instead of taking one up, and then the other…Then I'd come down the ladder, and then I'd go pick up this huge amplifier, and I'd go up the ladder again. It was very heavy, and I set it up in the booth. I was ready to go—there was something godly about it. You're overseeing the whole thing you know, you feel so above it all, and you are.

"I was one of the few guys who could announce and keep score at the same time, even when we got an electronic board. My scorekeeping was considered the Bible. I didn't want to interfere with the concentration of the players, but I heard from the kids on the bench that they like to hear details. So I would say, 'Gonzalez hits a line drive to short,' and wait for the shortstop to actually catch it. Then, 'Ferrera makes a long throw to first, and he is out.' The mothers and fathers loved it."

He announced all the games of Luis Gonzalez and Tino Martinez, as well as Joe Magadan and his brother Dave. Fred McGriff was known as Friendly Freddy McGriff as a kid.

Along the way, West Tampa broke the race barrier. "You don't realize this as a kid. When we played out of town in Dade City or Zephyrhills, West Tampa got a lot of disputed calls because of Hispanic players. We were told, let the fathers handle it. Those teams were very good, but when you saw West Tampa and Belmont Heights play, it was magnificent. Robert Saunders, Jr. was the first black to play for West Tampa, and we didn't think about it. We had grown up with the Little Rascals, and there was always a black kid in the neighborhood."

"We didn't see segregation since we weren't white, and it was not unusual. We always saw the colored water fountains in the stores, and just accepted it. By the time I was in the seventh grade, it was changing. If you went to Dade City or other cracker country, people told me, 'you better watch out.' We never played much of the white leagues because they mostly lost after the first games, including the ones from Palma Ceia and South Tampa. Hillsborough County had more Little League teams than any other place in the world. Tapi Rodriquez was the leader of all that."

When asked if he could tell that Gonzalez and Martinez were destined for greatness, he said, "To tell you the truth, I was more surprised at the number of these

Photo from the authors' collection

Members of the 1967 West Tampa Little League pose at the Little League World Series in Williamsport, PA. West Tampa teams would return to the next three LLWS tournaments, winning it all in 1970.

kids that didn't make the majors. There were so many kids playing that had such great talent that the shame was that they didn't make it. Tino's brother, Rene, now a vice president of Heritage Bank in Tampa, was a hell of a ball player."

One that sticks out in his mind is a kid named Ricky Alfonso. "Ricky was the greatest twelve-year-old ball player I ever saw. His nickname was the Cat. He hit a ball one night that was just like the movie *The Natural*. The ball went over the lights, across a big equipment building behind the field and finally came down near the swimming pool across the park. I think he was at second base and the ball was still in the air. It was incredible."

"In West Tampa, the lucky thing that we had, and I do mean lucky, is that we had so many parents who were involved in our lives. Parents aren't involved today like then. We had to send volunteers home because we didn't need them. And some of the volunteers didn't even have a family member playing in the game. That's just how it was in West Tampa."

The twelve-year-olds finished seventh in the world only three years after the league was created, then they went back two years later and finished fifth in the world—1965 and 1967. Then, the Senior League was created for fourteen- to fifteen-year-olds. They went to the World Series in 1968 and 1969, where they

finished second, and then in 1970, they won it all. A few years later, the teams from Belmont Heights would go to the World Series six times, winning in 1982.

Why does Hillsborough County grow baseball players like roses? Beiro thinks it was the leaders who taught kids at the Boys Club, in recreation leagues, in high schools. They were committed and gave guidance, they were wise and cared for the kids. Tampa is a baseball city.

Beiro graduated from Leto High School in 1969 and went to work at the American Can Company in Ybor City where his father worked. But he continued to freelance as an announcer. He worked in professional wrestling while still doing baseball.

Along the way, Beiro approached a Tampa man, Mitchell Mick, who was building a network of radio stations across the country that would broadcast local championship games. Soon, Beiro was working side by side with Mick, who also owned the Tampa Tarpons, an affiliate of the Cincinnati Reds.

When West Tampa Little League rose to championship levels, Mick went to the team and said that he wanted to put the games on the air, but the team would have to raise sponsorship dollars. The parents could hear their kids playing in important tournaments. The stations were very local frequency like WHBO and WALT radio, and the games were always played in the daytime. The parents came through.

In the afternoon of the games, you could walk down any street in West Tampa and not miss one play of the game, because it was on the radio in every house.

Together Beiro and Mick went to the 1975 Little League World Championship when Belmont Heights was competing, but lost. That year, there were nine different world championships in the United States at stake. Little League, Senior League, Girl's Softball, among others, and Tampa had five teams in the series. No other city had ever done that. None of the Tampa teams won, but it was still a record-setting statistic.

Beiro's affiliation with Mick was secure as he announced baseball for his network (ISI Sports Network) for some time to come, and sports broadcasting became his career. Although Mick later had him do a game from time to time Beiro largely quit announcing Little League in 1979 to become the announcer at Tampa's jai alai fronton. The announcing for West Tampa Little League prepared him for the rest of his career. He became a much-sought-after boxing announcer in matches all over the country. Despite his blindness, he still does some work in the ring. He introduces the fighters in the ring and then, after the fight, announces the decision. He writes the boxers' statistics with a magic marker in letters big enough that he can see, and then memorizes them. After the fight, the attendants tell him the scores of the judges, and he remembers them to announce the winner. He also became a sports talk-show host on WFLA Radio.

Beiro is now facing his disability. He announces local boxing with his wife sitting beside him reading the program into his ear. He can't do on-the-air announcing anymore. He says, "It gets back to that West Tampa thing—I have friends, family

and people who care deeply about me. They support me."

One day he ran into an acquaintance who had been in jail for some time, and the guy said, "Hey, Mark. When I was in the lock-up, I used to see you on boxing. And I would tell everyone, 'I know that guy, he's from the neighborhood.' And no one would believe me." Beiro said, "It's funny how West Tampa people respond to fame. They never forget." For the opening day of West Tampa Little League each year, he is the emcee.

He remembers the game between Arizona Diamondbacks and the New York Yankees, when Luis Gonzales and Tino Martinez faced off in the 2001 World Series. Gonzales got the game-winning hit. Luis was standing at first base after the hit, and Tino was playing first base and congratulating him. The next day, Luis said, "I hope all the old guys in the coffee shops in West Tampa are reading their newspapers this morning and celebrating with me, that I got the winning hit."

Beiro's talent was just of a different sort, one of a kind. It's hard to understand why he never tried to make the majors as an announcer. He says he wasn't good at self- promotion. He seems to have no regrets. And he doesn't look back — unless you count what he holds in his heart for West Tampa, and Dewey Street, where he grew up, around kids who played the game with him and who are, in his memory, unchanged.

WEST TAMPA UMPIRE: GEORGE TAMARGO

George Tamargo looks back at West Tampa Little League as the place that shaped his character. His father, Tony, like so many others, helped build the field. Local businesses, like the West Tampa Optimist Club, Alessi Bakery, and Latin American Furniture, supported the team. The kids all had shirts and caps, or, when they were old enough, full uniforms, gloves, and shoes made of kangaroo skin. Everybody knew everybody else. Coaches laid down the rules, and parents backed them up. Family was everything. During All-Star games, parents took the day off from work to see their kids play.

"They taught us community, they taught us respect. They taught us how to be young men at an early age. They taught us that you had to earn everything in life. Nothing was given to you. You had to work hard. Understand that [the park] was built by our fathers. They would steal construction-site equipment and blocks and stuff to build these things. They would spend their Saturdays and Sundays building concession stands, roofs, fences, side walls.

"And they showed you a sense of responsibility, for you to be somebody, or least to have respect for yourself. You had to learn the good and the bad and make the right choices. And if an adult told you anything, it was 'yes, maam,' or 'yes sir.'

"The coach tells you to run. If not, then don't play baseball. If he tells you to pick up the bats, pick them up. You knew you had to do what you were told. You might not like it or agree with it, but you had to do it. In my life, he was right. My parents are still right. In that way, they prepared you for the tough roads in life.

"And you knew if you were going to be any good. I knew who was better than me at the age of six! And I knew who wasn't better than me. And when we got to our teenage years, getting ready for high school, I knew I wasn't going to be a high school ball player. I wasn't good enough. I knew my role at the team—that's why I became an umpire, to stay with them."

He got paid pretty well, for the times, $8.50 per game. "And gas was all of twenty-five cents a gallon! You do five of those and you've got cash money. You do three or four a week and on Saturdays you do four of them, and you go to the bar!"

Photo from the authors' collection

George Tamargo enjoyed an interesting, if brief, career as an umpire for high school, college, and minor league baseball.

His umpiring took him places—minor leagues, and spring training for the Cincinnati Reds. He was hardly grown, and it showed. He remembers one particular game when he was standing among the greats.

"Johnny Bench is catching, Fred Norman was on the mound, Pete Rose [then with the Phillies] is up to bat, and… this is the God's honest truth. There's a man on first. I get into my position. Norman releases the pitch, Bench catches the ball, I haven't called ball or strike. Bench turns around, Rose steps out of the box and looks at me and says, 'What the hell is it?' 'What the f— do I know? I didn't see it,' I said. 'Tell him to throw it again.' It was the first screwball I'd ever seen and I didn't know what it was."

Tamargo has a restaurant, a Mr. Empanada franchise on Gandy Boulevard. He is a stocky man, a natural-born storyteller with the personality of a cheerful bulldog. At West Tampa, he says, he grew up in other ways as well.

"You're thirteen, fourteen, and you started noticing women. We were more interested in girls than in practicing or playing. We did both. The girls would go see us play, and we would take a walk out there by the swimming pool behind center field of the big league team. You found a dark spot, and your teenage years began."

Baseball even led him to love. Tamargo's wife, Cynthia, tells the story best: "I was the team statistician at Tampa Catholic, and he was the umpire. He was chewing tobacco, and spitting, just all gross and nasty. He was twenty and I was seventeen, and he was an older man as far as I was concerned. I much preferred some of the ball players I went to school with. But the coach was always encouraging me to talk to him. He said, 'Why don't you give Georgie a smooch?' He says he told the coach, 'If

I ever get her to go out with me, she'll marry me.'

"So then, a couple of years passed, and I graduated, and I went to the University of Tampa as the team statistician, and he was umpiring there. We had a game at Redsland, now the Yankees minor league practice field. It was the minor league field for the Cincinnati Reds. At that same time, it was used for Hillsborough Community College baseball. UT was playing HCC at the Redlands. He was umpiring the game. By then, I was attracted to him. He was on the field and singing some stupid song, it was a Frank Sinatra song, he was acting silly, and his smile kind of captivated me, and I thought, 'He's not so bad after all.'

"After the game, I pretended I couldn't unlock my car. So he came over to help me. In the meantime, I asked him if he wanted to go with me to a party that night. He said yes. I jiggled the key a little bit and unlocked my car. I met him at the party, I think. That was sort of our first date. The next night we went out again, and that was it. A month later we were engaged. A year and a day later, we were married."

It was a true West Tampa moment. After the wedding at St. Joseph's Catholic Church, they took a ride in a friend's white Cadillac. It was like going on a pilgrimage. They stopped at every important place in their lives. "We went to his house," Cynthia Tamargo said. "Then we drove to West Tampa Little League, then MacFarlane Park, then the West Tampa Boys Club, the house I grew up in, and then we went to the hall."

The reception hall was the Letter Carriers Union Hall on Cypress Street. Eight hundred people showed up. It was another community event in the life of West Tampa.

Like other men who played there, George Tamargo believes there will never be a place like West Tampa baseball, where the game brought everybody together, no matter what. But you can probably tell by now that baseball was not Tamargo's true love. He even gave up umpiring for it. The game came in second to that girl who once got grossed out by his tobacco chewing and spitting. George and Cynthia Tamargo have four children. As of April 17, 2009, they were married thirty-three years.

A FAMILY AFFAIR: DAVE MAGADAN

Dave Magadan is quiet, soft-spoken. He doesn't strut his stuff in the macho manner of many professional ball players. He doesn't brag, although he could.

His career on the field, minors and majors, lasted eighteen years, mostly with the Mets, but also the Mariners, the Marlins, the Astros, the Cubs, and Oakland before he retired in 2001 from the San Diego Padres. He went on to be a coach in the Padres organization and moved to the Boston Red Sox, where he was named hitting coach in 2006. Magadan must know what he's doing. The Sox won the World Series in 2007. The team made it to the American League championship series—they were defeated by the Rays—in 2008.

And he comes from what you might call a small dynasty. His father, Joe, was one of the standouts of the Intersocial League. Lou Piniella is his cousin, and his

godfather. And he got his start in West Tampa Little League.

"I started even before Little League age. My brother is older than me, five and a half years…I would go to practices with my father, when he was coaching my older brother, and I would play with the older kids at the practice, and hit and field and all that stuff. And when I became of age to start playing Little League, my father started coaching me. I was probably seven years old."

Magadan, a Jesuit graduate, played straight through at West Tampa Little League until he was eighteen, when he switched to American Legion Post 248, also located at the West Tampa field. The team won the American Legion World Series that year. He was selected as the game's MVP.

Through it all, his parents were his mainstay in baseball. They were devoted to West Tampa Little League. They were devoted to sports, and their kids. "I never stayed with a babysitter my whole life, never. If we couldn't go, if me and my brother couldn't go where they were going, they wouldn't go. We were their life."

His father was so dedicated that he took a job as an accountant for a produce company that allowed him to come home in time for Dave to practice. His father pitched, pitched, pitched, and Dave hit, hit, hit. Now and then, father would take son to Cuscaden Park to tell him about the highlights of his own career. "He used to tell me about some of the balls that he would hit, and how far he had hit them…He was very proud of that part of his life."

Magadan practiced every day, played games twice a week. When he wasn't playing, he was playing made-up games with his friends. One was cup ball. The boys would gather up several soda cups and crunch them into a ball. A pitcher threw it, and the hitter had to hit the ball with his hand. And they played another game called hot box. The game was played on two bases: "There would be two kids on each base, and the kid that's running would get in the middle and you'd do a hot box, like a run-down, and you try to get them out. You'd throw the ball to the other kid, and you try and tag the kid between the bases out. If you can't, you throw it back to the other kid—you try to get them out, and if the kid was safe, he'd get a point."

Games like this are apparently unique to Tampa. "I've talked to other guys throughout the years that I've played with in pro ball or coached, and they have no idea what hot box or cup ball is." And they probably had no idea of what it was like coming up in West Tampa, when five hundred to six hundred kids participated each season.

"It was a destination place for kids in that era—when there were practices, every field had teams on it. I can remember that as I got older, you would practice every day, but you can only be on the field on two out of the four practice days. The other two days you'd be in the cage because there just wasn't enough physical space to be able to accommodate all the teams.

"We were known throughout the city as being the noisy fans of West Tampa. Whenever we played another Little League team, when teams would come to West Tampa, the stands were full, and all the way down the fences on left field, down the

right field line and in the outfield you had fans sitting in lawn chairs."

And they knew talent. Like Tino Martinez. "I remember going to his games when he was twelve, and I was probably eighteen, seventeen years old, and that was an event, because he was so good, and he was so much bigger than the other kids, and he was hitting the ball so much further than the other kids. When his team was playing, it was standing room only."

Meanwhile, his cousin Lou, twenty years older, was never far from his mind. He and his family sometimes attended Piniella's games. The lesson was indelible. "What it did for me was that he made me feel the dream was attainable, to know that somebody in our family made it to the major leagues and played and was successful and had a long career. . . . I think it gave me the confidence to think that this could happen to me, because it had happened to him."

His father taught him the nuts and bolts of baseball. His mother gave him heart. But he took his time going to the majors. First, he went to college at the University of Alabama: "I just didn't think I was ready, maturity wise. I'd never really been away from home, and in pro ball, it's a stark reality. As soon as you start playing pro ball, you are thrown into the lion's den. You've got to perform. There's no grace period. Going to college, I felt like it eased me into being away from home, and you got the fall schedule, which is very light and you get your feet wet, and then eventually the spring season comes around, and so I just thought it was easier transition to go to college than to sign professionally."

Magadan looks at the West Tampa Little League as wistfully as others who remember the glory days. Unlike some other professional ball players who have apparently forgotten their roots, he said he'd be willing to help out with the field to keep the memories alive and to give a new generation of kids the experience that meant so much to him.

GILBERT CUESTA

"The only pay is the kids. . . . They come up to you thirty years later, and you're walking down the street, and they say, 'Coach Cuesta,' and they give you a hug. It's hard to place who they are, but they know you."

—Gilbert Cuesta

It's a family affair. Gilbert Cuesta's cousin John coached the West Tampa senior league team that won the 1970 Little League World Series. His other cousin, Pop, is the legendary coach at Jefferson High School. But it was Gilbert who probably shaped more young baseball talent than either of his cousins.

"My father and Pop's father came to Tampa from Spain when he was nineteen," Gil Cuesta said. "They actually went to live with John's father for a while. After I was born, we lived on Spruce Street and then when I was twelve or thirteen, Daddy built a house on Cherry Street just two blocks from the West Tampa ball field."

"I went to Jefferson High School. I was pretty small, like five foot five inches, and I tried to play football, and they said I was too little. Once I got out of high

school, I sprouted and started playing baseball. I played second base for about twelve years in the West Tampa municipal league. We played every Sunday."

"I started too late. I wish I had started early, like Tony La Russa. He was just average, but every Saturday and Sunday, when we were playing football in the park, Tony would be with his father at the baseball diamond throwing ground balls and everything. That's how he made it to the majors, because he was such a good defensive player."

Cuesta worked for Seven Up Bottling Co. as warehouse manager for fifteen years, but gave it up when he got involved with Little League. It was Pop who got Gil into West Tampa Little League when it became too much for him in the mid-1960s: "Pop was going to the University of Tampa, and I think he needed another year to get his degree. So he called me up and said, 'Man, I need some help with this Little League team.' And I said, 'I don't know much about coaching.' He said, 'Come over and help me,' so I helped him for a year, and the next year he landed the job at Jefferson. He said, 'It's all yours now.' So I got hooked, and I've been there close to forty years now."

Cuesta has coached at every level of play at West Tampa. He must have some magic as a coach, even though everything he knows about it he learned only from watching other coaches.

"I think you can teach more from ten to twelve than you can when they're up at a higher level. At ten or twelve if you start doing the right things that you're supposed to do, you can start developing. When you're already up at fourteen or fifteen, if you haven't developed skills, or getting there, it's tough to start to teach it.

"There's all kinds of kids, and you have to teach them all different. Some kids, you have to bring along real slow. You just can't say, 'You should have done this!' You just bring them along real slow, and eventually they catch on. If a kid is average in ability, you can mold him into being a decent ball player. You don't have to have great talent. I think all the years I coached over there, they always used to say I had the best hitting teams because we worked hard.

"Back then, you scheduled practice, and every kid would come. You had twelve kids, you had twelve every day. And when you have twelve every day, you can do a lot of stuff that you can't do when they're not there. You can get four guys to hit and eight guys out there (in the field), and they're playing real games, and you get to teach them a lot more than they can learn when there are only nine. You catch a fly ball, you catch a ground ball. I always took a test, to make sure the kids enjoyed it. At the middle of the season, I would get all the kids, and I would say, 'Look, I think we've probably been working too hard. You guys want to take a couple days off?' 'No, no,' they'd say. They wanted to practice. I assumed that when that happened, they were happy."

He became a second father to some of them. "The kids know when you're being fair to them, and when you treat them right. They know that, and they respect it. You want to teach them that it's only a game, and that you can learn a lot by being

on a team, and then you try to teach them all you can about baseball."

Some kids don't need all that much help. "You can tell right away. I can see the way a kid throws the ball, or how he holds the bat, and you can tell right away he's going to be a decent ball player."

Take the case of a kid named Tino Martinez.

"I was good friends with his father. I knew him real well, and Tino started off the season, when he was twelve, he wasn't hitting very good. And his father called me one day and said, 'You think you could work with Tino to see what's wrong with him?' and I said, 'Sure man, I'll meet you at the park on Sunday.' So we went to the park, we went over to the bigger field—the majors is like 200 feet, and we went to the other field, I think it's 240. And I warmed up. I threw batting practice for years and years, and I used to throw pretty good. So Tino got up there, and I started throwing them, and it was like shots all over the world! I said, 'I'll show this guy one time. I'll throw him a change-up, because those kids aren't used to change ups.' And he parked it over the fence, and I said, 'Man, there's nothing wrong with Tino!' From that day on, he hit so many home runs that year. His father actually got mad at me one day. I was already a game up, and the season was almost over. Tino came up. They had a guy on second, and I was up only two runs. I walked Tino intentionally, and his father got mad at me, because I wouldn't let him hit. And I said, 'Man, you've got to realize I'm trying to watch out for my kids. They're trying to win, too.'"

Tino was a pitcher in his early days before moving to first base, where he would play the rest of his career. "Tino was a good pitcher. He was strong. His younger brother, Tony, used to catch. Tino threw so hard that Tony would put sponges in his mitt."

And Cuesta coached Martinez**,** as well as Luis Gonzalez and Fred McGriff. "Luis was a very good hitter and a good fielder. He was a pretty decent size for Little League. He gave me a pair of cleats that I still have in my car. He said 'try them on,' and they fit me, size 10 ½, and I have used them for years playing football and whatever on Sundays. I probably could get some money for those things." McGriff went on to the major leagues to fall just seven home runs short of the storied 500-club. McGriff hit as many home runs as Lou Gehrig. But when McGriff was a kid, there was no hint of what was to come.

"You know," says Cuesta, "he's had all those home runs in the major leagues, and he never hit a home run until he got to high school. He never had a home run in Little League, and that's a short fence, and he never had one in the seniors.

"Fred had been playing for the Yellow Jackets in Carver City, but his mother wasn't happy with the way things were going, so he got a release to come to West Tampa. He was the nicest kid. I used to take him home every day after practice. I guess we had a good relationship and he looked up to me."

He remembers Sammy Militello, who went to Jefferson High School and was drafted by the Yankees in 1982: "I don't know what happened to Sammy. He was a heck of a pitcher, and all of a sudden—I think it was mental mostly. He lost control.

He had all the ingredients to be a good major league player, but he went up there, had a pretty good first year, and then all of a sudden he couldn't throw a strike, so they let him go.

"I can't imagine fifty or sixty thousand people yelling and you have to have the mental toughness to focus on what you are doing." He compares it to being a high school basketball star who takes his girl to the fair and wants to win her a teddy bear at the basketball concession. When the barker yells, "Hey, watch him," he misses three shots in a row. The pressure is tough.

Some young men excel at football where they get tackled, run over, and knocked side to side, but put them in front of a baseball coming at 70 miles an hour and they panic. Cuesta says: "Sometimes a kid can take a hit, and he'll be scared forever. I just finished coaching my grandson, who is twelve, and he got hit by the hardest-throwing kid in West Tampa at least five times. He's tough and shakes it off. But some of the kids get hit one time and they start staying away from the plate. I guess it's something in your mind that you are not going to be afraid. You try to teach them…look, it if hits you, it's just going to hurt for a little bit, and some shake it off, other kids don't."

Gil Cuesta has eased his pace some, but only some. "Up to the last year, I could still throw batting practice pretty hard. But my arm is starting to slow down. I think I can still probably throw, but I don't throw anywhere near as hard as I used to, but I still have a lot of control. If you have control, then you're not going to be hitting the kids when they're taking batting practice. They learn to get confident, and they can stand up against anybody."

Now he's coaching his five-year-old grandson in T-ball. "I can tell you he's going to be good. He can already throw the ball very good, and he hits very good."

He thinks of quitting coaching. It's only been forty years. But he's not ready yet. He doesn't know what he'd do with his time. "It would be a lot of boring days," he says.

Forty years, and he never got paid a dime.

"The only pay is the kids. They come up to you, thirty years later, and you're walking down the street, and they say, 'Coach Cuesta!' and they give you a hug. It's hard to place who they are, but they know you."