

1st touch foundation

Derrek Lee Hits a Local Homerun

by Lynn Machon



Derrek Lee

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Local celebrity Derrek Lee has enjoyed a phenomenal career in Major League Baseball. As first baseman for the Chicago Cubs, he was named the 2005 National League batting champion and is a two-time Gold Glove recipient. Yet it is Lee's effort to make a difference through his 1st Touch Foundation that truly defines his personal success.

A graduate of El Camino High School, Lee's ties to the Sacramento area are very strong. For the past five years, when not playing ball, Lee, his wife, Christina, and 4 1/2-year old daughter, Jada, have made a home in El Dorado Hills. Prior to that, they lived in an apartment in Folsom, where Jada currently attends preschool during the off-season. According to Lee, the idea for estab-

lishing a nonprofit foundation developed during a road trip to spring training with his long-time friend, Mark Martella. "I was born and raised in Sacramento and I just wanted to give something back to the community," he says simply.

The friends officially launched 1st Touch Foundation in January 2006, and subsequently awarded scholarships to two deserving students from El Camino High. Their next goal was to build a youth center in Del Paso Heights, where much of Lee's family still lives. "We bought the land, met with city officials, planned fundraising events, hired help, and much more," Martella says. "We were excited and ready to go." But plans suddenly changed.

In September 2006, Lee's daughter Jada, then

three years old, was diagnosed with Leber's Congenital Amaurosis (LCA), a rare genetic disease of the retina that has since caused loss of vision in one of her eyes. Lee immediately took a mid-season break from baseball to focus his attention, and that of his foundation's, on helping his daughter and others with LCA.

Since September 2006, 1st Touch Foundation's Project 3000, has significantly increased public awareness of LCA and raised over \$1 million for research. But fundraising is only one objective of Project 3000. "Money is always great and it's necessary for research," Lee clarifies, "but the primary goal of Project 3000 is to find the 3000 LCA patients in North America." According to researchers at University of Iowa, genetic testing of all patients is needed to better identify specific disease-causing genes. Approximately one-quarter of LCA patients have been identified and tested.

While the success of Project 3000 is undeniable, the local endeavors of 1st Touch Foundation can't be overshadowed. Last Christmas, a fundraising event held at Martella's home in Roseville enabled thousands of dollars worth of toys to be distributed by Del Paso Police officers directly to neighborhood children. Looking ahead, 1st Touch will help plan a golf tournament scheduled for late October at Catta Verdera Country Club in Lincoln, with proceeds to benefit Project 3000 and the local Society for the Blind. Another idea in the works, says Martella, is scholarship fundraising via an outdoor ice-skating rink in Roseville. And what about the Del Paso Youth Center? Lee admits he still thinks about it every day.

A nationally-recognized athlete, and one of baseball's biggest stars, Lee humbly says, "It's important what we do on the field, but I don't think that makes as much of a difference as what we do off [of it]." That philosophy led to Lee's prized nomination last season for the Roberto Clemente Award, which recognizes baseball players for outstanding community involvement.

As for Jada, "She's doing extremely well," Lee says. "She's the happiest girl you'll ever meet. Not for one moment have I ever looked at her and thought, 'Man, is she OK?' She's always been OK." When in town, the Lee family enjoys going to Apple Hill, shopping at the Roseville Galleria and skiing in Tahoe.

To learn more, visit 1sttouch.org or project3000.org. ●