

Going to bat for a good cause

BEST SCHOLARSHIP RECEPTION. Jim Rice, big leaguers support local charity event.

BY ANDY LOIGU
The Express-Times

BETHLEHEM | Enough former ballplayers to fill a major-league roster, including Hall of Famer Jim Rice, showed their support for the work of BEST, Inc., by attending the charitable organization's fourth annual scholarship reception at the Sands Hotel as celebrity guests on Sunday night.

Through its annual fundraiser, BEST (Building Education Support Teams) aims to raise \$25,000 to financially assist students in need, who show potential, so they can earn a college education. A portion of the money was raised by auctioning sports memorabilia signed by the celebrity guests, who will play in a golf tournament this morning.

Approximately 100 supporters joined the celebrities, 48 scholarship winners and 15 members of the BEST board of directors at the event. Donors' award plaques were presented to Horvath Brothers, the late John Lunsford (accepted by his son Gregg) board member Bob Johnson and Linny and Beall Fowler, the board president and her spouse.

"One hundred percent of



EXPRESS-TIMES PHOTO | LISA MASSEY

Hall of Fame outfielder Jim Rice, right, of the Boston Red Sox and former Detroit Tigers outfielder John Grubb sign autographs.

our proceeds go to students from the Lehigh Valley and Phillipsburg area," said Judy Tierney, one of the organization's co-founders, along with Billy Staples. "The board members pay dues to cover our costs and we provide a support team of mentors to help the students through."

A recent U.S. Department of Education study found that students who are the first in their family history to attend college generally come from poor and academically challenged neighborhoods.

"Nobody from my family had gone to college before," said Ben Artreche of Bethlehem, the first college graduate (DeSales) to be helped by the program.

"Billy (Staples) put his money on this horse," he said in reference to himself. "If I had failed, all of you would not be here tonight."

In a demonstration of gratitude, Artreche presented a donation of his own to the BEST, Inc., organization.

"An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest," he said.

One of the recent college graduates who have benefitted from the program is Maria Lopez of Liberty High School, the youngest of 11 children from a low-income family and the first in her family to attend college. She graduated from Kutztown University in four years and now works as a counselor.

Staples and Tierney recognized this year's graduates, both from Bethlehem. Edwin Leon earned a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from East Stroudsburg University. Jonathan Nivar earned a bachelor's degree in liberal arts from Kutztown.

"The students' tales of overcoming obstacles are awesome," said former Phillies' outfielder Jim Eisenreich, who has attended each of the BEST scholarship receptions.

Other former Phillies attending the reception were pitchers Tommy Greene, Joel Bennett, Art Mahaffey and Dickie Noles, plus catchers Jimmy Schaffer and Ozzie Virgil Jr., infielder Bobby Malkmus and outfielder Doug Clemens.

A 1962 graduate of Syracuse University, Clemens knew longtime Phillipsburg and Bethlehem Catholic football coach Bob Stem at Syracuse. Stem was a center on the 1959 football national champions at Syracuse.

"I went to Syracuse to play

football and was a classmate of Ernie Davis," Clemens said. "I didn't play much football. I got injured and then concentrated on baseball. Stem was well liked and respected by everybody there."

Also among the former ballplayers at the event was Tito Landrum, who never played high school baseball but became a Baltimore hero when he powered a 10th-inning home run in the 1983 American League Championship Series that sent the Orioles into the World Series. They then defeated the Phillies in five games.

"I was fortunate to be in the right place at the right time," he said. "The Orioles got me from St. Louis in August just to be a fill-in player, pinch-run, go in for defense. That team was a family, all about sticking together and winning. That playoff homer and being on that great team is a fantastic memory for me."

Most of the attendees sought out Rice for autographs, and the 16-year Red Sox outfielder who batted .298 with 382 homers and 1,451 runs batted in, obliged them.

Ned Bolcar, a former standout football linebacker for Phillipsburg High, Notre Dame and NFL, and Tony LoBianco, actor in the movie "French Connection," also took a bow.