

Baseball team's success rallies community around sauce, serving others

Brian Roewe | Mar. 29, 2014
Kansas City, Mo.

In Kansas City, barbecue is king. But for close to three decades its baseball team, the Kansas City Royals, has rarely lived up to its regal name.

As the team nears a new season, its players, staff and fans can look back on the 2013 summer when the two elements of baseball and barbecue teamed up to rally the community around the Royals' first winning season in a decade. But more importantly, to rally around an effort to lend a helping hand to those who had fallen on hard times.

All with the help of a bottle of barbecue sauce.

In 2008, Royals designated hitter Billy Butler and his wife, Katie, founded the Hit-It-A-Ton program in partnership with the Bishop Sullivan Center. The original idea was novel: For every home run Butler hit, he would donate a ton of food (\$250) to the center's two food pantries.

Formed in 1972 and named after Kansas City-St. Joseph Bishop John J. Sullivan, the center offers the area's low-income population emergency assistance for basic necessities, and aims to help them become self-sufficient. Through its pantries, it provides two tons of food each day (about 200 days a year) to about 1,300 families a month, and another 40 tons through its community kitchen (where it feeds 260 people each night), amounting \$110,000 in annual food costs. In the last fiscal year, it offered more than \$300,000 to 2,300 families to help cover rent or utility bills.

"If you can get someone back on their own two feet, then they don't need assistance as much. ... They're better off, everyone's better off," said Maria Antonia, the center's communications director.

The Butlers' connection to the center came through Katie, who volunteered there as part of a requirement for an online course. She remained active afterward while Billy went to work on the baseball diamond.

"This was kind of my thing, nobody knew who I was, and it wasn't something I was being recognized for as Billy Butler's [at the time] fiancée or anything like that," she said.

Volunteering amid the Great Recession, Katie saw the realities of the people who turned to the center: three generations of families living together, unable to get by on their own; families who were normally dependent on school lunches, now relying on the center's nightly dinners to feed their children.

"One of the things that struck me was that the majority of the people they serve, they do work ... they just try their best and sometimes still come up short at the end of the month," she said.

The center's staff soon recognized her baseball-playing beau and began brainstorming partnership opportunities.

The result was Hit-It-A-Ton.

The program has expanded from its original form, adding doubles for a half-ton of food (\$125), and bringing in corporate donors and fans to contribute through matching donations and by buying autographed bats, balls and pictures. In 2012, local restaurant Zarda Bar-B-Q joined in the collaboration, placing "Billy's Ton of BBQ" sandwich on their menu, with \$1 of each sale going to Bishop Sullivan Center. In January, Zarda proposed the next chapter: Billy's Hit-It-A-Ton barbecue sauce.

"For anyone that knows Billy, he's a Southern Florida boy and loves his barbecue more than anything," Katie said. "So for someone to want to make a barbecue sauce and put his name on it was as big -- or bigger -- than winning some baseball award."

"Our thoughts were that this is a sauce that the grocery stores will allow us to sell during baseball season," said Terry Hyer, Zarda chief operating officer, hoping at the onset to sell a couple thousand bottles in a Kansas City market already saturated by more than 100 different sauces.

Further stifling expectations was the Royals' recent track record. Heading into the 2013 season, the team had managed only seven winning seasons since 1985, the year of its last playoff appearance and only World Series title. After a solid April, the team tanked in May, going 8-20 and losing 11 straight home games -- less than ideal marketing conditions.

"At the time, you don't really want to push something like a barbecue sauce to fans when really you're just trying to focus on getting out of a really bad losing streak," Katie recalled.

In early June, Billy had a shipment of bottles brought to Kauffman Stadium to share with his teammates. Starting pitcher Jeremy Guthrie jokingly brought a bottle into the dugout and TV cameras found the team playing with it.

"Then next thing you know, we won [six games] in a row from the time we took it out there," Billy told *NCR*.

The "rally sauce" was born.

With every clutch hit and win, the sauce appeared, its iconic moment coming when teammates smeared it on the face of first baseman Eric Hosmer after a June 12 walk-off hit. Fans on Twitter and social media began using the hashtag #RallySauce to explain the team's abrupt turnaround. From the sauce's June 5 debut, the Royals compiled the second-most wins in baseball and the fourth-best record.

While the team eventually moved on from the superstitious sauce, fans still flocked to it. They bought "Fear the Sauce" T-shirts and attended events benefiting the center. Grocery stores struggled to keep the sauce on the shelves, while online sales drew customers from across the country and around the globe. Hyer, a 33-year vet of the barbecue business, was taken aback by the volume of sales: The sauce has sold more than 48,000 bottles.

"We had good expectations, but could have never, ever dreamed about what was to take place," he said.

In January, at the team's annual FanFest, Zarda presented Bishop Sullivan Center with a check for \$32,000 as a result of the sauce and sandwich sales -- more than six times the \$5,000 sandwich sales alone generated in 2012. Overall, the Hit-It-A-Ton program provided in 2013 more than 332 tons of food (\$83,000), and more than 1,600 tons (\$410,000) since its inception.

Antonia said that the program's financial contributions offered plenty, but the Butlers "believe in giving back to the community," and continue to volunteer at the community kitchen, attend fundraiser events and contribute to

auctions.

With two young daughters, Katie said it was important for them to learn at a young age "that the life that we live is not normal" and to appreciate what they have but also recognize the need to give back to others. Billy echoed that, adding he wanted his baseball career to extend beyond the game on the field.

"I want to make an impact on other people's lives, and [with] every little bit you can change somebody's life," he said.

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