

“We Need to Give Every Kid the Chance to Play”: An Interview With Adam Rosales¹ About Giving Back to the Community and Keeping Disadvantaged Children and Youth Grounded Through Baseball

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In this interview, former Major League Baseball player Adam Rosales talks about his engagement in helping troubled children through his non-profit organization, Sandlot Nation, and other means. He stresses the importance of giving back to society and explains that his motivation to be involved in charity work stems from his faith and from the values he was taught as a child. In his opinion, playing baseball is an excellent way to encourage everyone to live in the moment and appreciate every experience for what it is. He emphasizes the significance of giving disadvantaged children and youth a chance to play baseball and reflects on the capacity of this sport for inclusion.

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Insights: Adam, thanks so much for doing this interview. I really appreciate it.

Adam Rosales: Not a problem. I'm happy to do it.

Insights: This is an interview that will be published in a special issue of a scholarly journal focusing on baseball and inclusion to raise awareness of kids who are less privileged, especially those with learning disabilities. You are very involved in charitable work for disadvantaged children. In preparation for this interview, I found many newspaper articles about your involvement in community service; for example, a report from the days when you were a baseball player in Phoenix said the following about you: “After a tough playoffs elimination, the Arizona Diamondbacks are now in off-season mode which means Adam Rosales is in full blown charity mode. The infielder talked about his upcoming charity night ... to raise funds and equipment for lesser privileged children.” So, helping kids in need has always been important to you.

1 Adam Rosales was a Major League Baseball (MLB) player for the Cincinnati Reds, Oakland Athletics, Texas Rangers, San Diego Padres, Arizona Diamondbacks, and Cleveland Indians. He was active in the MLB for 14 years and was known for his ability to fill in any infield position.

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Adam Rosales: Of course. Charity work is so important. The organizations that I played for have all been very much involved in giving back to the community, always doing charitable work. I received great inspiration from these organizations and how they valued giving back to society. But then from there, it just springboarded into a little organization I called Sandlot Nation. I stuck to the baseball idea and I went out every Saturday morning through the season to play with kids. I tried to focus on towns that didn't have much opportunity for engaging young people in activities like this. I loved to spend time with the kids and play baseball, showing them that they were important to me. That's what I have done on my own. However, the majority of the charitable work I've done is through the aid of the organizations that I played for.

Insights: Why does charitable work have such a high priority in your life?

Adam Rosales: I think that most Major League Baseball (MLB) players are that kind of breed. We bring a certain type of personality to the table. You have to be humble to play this game. I think that probably all the grind that we have to go through and all the failure that we have to deal with helps us relate to kids – we can go down to an eight-year-old level if we have to.

Insights: When I hear people talk about you, pretty much everyone characterizes you as an extremely positive person that others are drawn to. Sports journalist Megan Zahneis put it this way: "Everywhere [Adam Rosales] goes – Cincinnati, Oakland, Arlington, San Diego – he's amassed a sort of cult following." Where does this positive attitude come from?

Adam Rosales: I guess it comes from my faith first of all. My faith in God is number one. But then my background is also important. My parents, my aunts and uncles all influenced me very much. They installed in me an enthusiasm for life. I don't want to mess with the gray areas in life and I don't want to go to the other end – I always want to stay positive. It's not easy all the time, but I fight hard to keep that mentality.

Insights: In your interviews, you talk a lot about your conviction that everything happens for a purpose. You said on numerous occasions that you believed you are a baseball player for a reason.

Adam Rosales: Absolutely. I have played baseball my whole life. Once I got to the Major Leagues, I thought that everything was going to be set and everything was going to be great. But after a year in the big leagues I realized that I was not fulfilled. I needed a better foundation for my life. I am really grateful to Donnie Moore, the Oakland A's chaplain, who was a great influence. Talking with him and feeling his enthusiasm for life changed me a lot. I began to realize that there was more to life than baseball and that there is a greater purpose to everything. This conviction helps me to stay positive and to be generous with my time.

Insights: You were an outstanding athlete, played for six different teams in the MLB, and could fill all infield positions. You even pitched a couple of times during your career. You were an unusually well-rounded baseball player. And yet, you never present yourself as a big star; you come across as very humble. What keeps you down to earth?

Adam Rosales: To be honest, I feel that I have always been just an average player. There was always someone better than me on the team. Plus, it's the big picture that keeps me in check. The universe is huge, and I am just a baseball player. And I am humbled to think of my parents and about all the time and hard work they put into me so that I can have the opportunity to play, along with my aunts, my uncles, all my friends and my coaches. I will never forget what people have done for me. If I did, I would be arrogant. There is no way I would have gotten into the big leagues without the support of so many people.

Insights: So you have never taken yourself too seriously?

Adam Rosales: No. I am no one special. I have always tried to be the same for everybody. I don't care if it's the general manager of the team or if it's somebody doing the concessions in the stands. I am always going to act the same with everyone I come across, and I appreciate the conversation that I have with them.

Insights: A little earlier, you said something about being humble helps you to relate to everyone, even to eight-year-olds. You spend a lot of your time with children, often with less privileged ones. As you mentioned earlier, a number of years ago you founded Sandlot Nation, a non-profit effort to bring kids together to play ball, but also to teach them about the importance of education.

Adam Rosales: I love spending time with kids. And I am always amazed by how little it takes to make a difference. I remember a kid named Mika from San Diego. On Father's Day, I threw him a ball. I didn't know anything about him, but then I met him four, five years later, and he told me how inspired he had felt over the years because I acknowledged him. Stories like that stand out to me. Many kids and parents have thanked me, even though I feel I haven't done much. It is always great to lighten up someone's life.

Insights: You even remember the kid's name. That says a lot about the way you respect people. From reading about your upbringing, I am aware that you know what it is like for kids who don't grow up on the sunny side of life.

Adam Rosales: Yes. Life has never been easy for me. My dad is an immigrant. He came to America from Mexico with his family when he was five years old. I think it was in 1957. So I'm half Mexican. My first memory is of the inner city of Chicago. I was four years old, watching a couple of guys stealing computers out of our house. I still remember the screeching tires. Later my uncles helped my parents get us out of the inner city and move to suburbs outside of Chicago. If I hadn't had that opportunity, it would have been very

hard. However, there were always financial burdens on the family. It was really tough. I brought what was going on at home to school, where it was hard for me to focus and concentrate, so I certainly wasn't the best student. We were a pretty scrappy family, just trying to get by. My dad was busting his tail off, my mom was busting her tail off with five kids. From an early age, I wanted to do everything I could to ease the burden. It was never a lay-up.

Insights: I guess that makes you very relatable to kids who struggle in school and don't have it easy. You mentioned earlier that baseball helped you deal with failure. From your experience, what life lessons has baseball taught you and what lessons can you teach the kids you work with?

Adam Rosales: Baseball teaches you a lot, like the importance of living in the moment. You might play for an MLB team right now, but you don't know whether you're going back to the minor leagues next week. In baseball, everything is fragile. They might get rid of you and you might never play another game in your life again. That's one thing I put in my mind, especially later in my career when I knew it was coming to an end: I was determined to play every inning and every pitch like it was my last. You have to be present to get something out of it. People ask me: "Do you miss baseball? Do you miss playing?" And I say: "I don't." And that's because I tried to live in the moment. Now it's a peaceful feeling. I don't miss it; I have no regrets. Baseball taught me to treat every day like it matters; like it's your last.

Insights: Very inspiring. Thank you for sharing your thoughts with me. But I am still really surprised that you don't miss playing baseball.

Adam Rosales: Let me add this to set the record straight: I don't miss playing, I don't miss the grind, but I do miss my teammates and I miss being around the clubhouse.

Insights: You have been able to make in difference in the lives of troubled kids with Sandlot Nation and other efforts. What else do you think baseball can do to help young players who struggle in school and other areas?

Adam Rosales: The chances of playing in the major leagues are not good. Even playing college ball is tough. But we need to give every kid the chance to play, even though most of them will never play professionally. In the youth sports, in little league, that's where we need to make sure that we are targeting these underprivileged or low-income type areas to give kids the opportunity to play. They need sports, and the experience of playing baseball can have a lasting and positive impact on them, given all the life lessons that the game can teach you. I'm all about that. I know where I come from. If I didn't have the opportunities that my uncles gave me, I would be at a totally different place in life now. You have to exert a positive influence on society, and I can do that by trying to inspire disadvantaged kids through baseball. It doesn't matter what you get out of it yourself.

Insights: That's a great attitude. What I like about the game is that it is so easy to include everyone. Even in major league baseball, you have guys who don't necessarily look like professional athletes. Look at Babe Ruth, for example. He didn't have a slim and athletic body type, yet he was the best player of all times. In baseball, most everyone can bring their skills to the game and help the team.

Adam Rosales: Absolutely. That's what you want to do. It's all about inclusion. That's why I travel around the country and do those Sandlot games. This is why I encourage kids to play baseball. I want to include everybody in a meaningful activity and give everyone a chance to socialize. I have a lot of passion for that – involving everybody.

Insights: Your excitement is contagious. It was great to have a chance to talk with you.

Adam Rosales: This has been fantastic. I appreciate you reaching out. It is not often that I get the chance to speak to somebody in Germany. Thanks for that!

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