

UNION COUNTY

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Teen goes to bat for needy children

Donates equipment to Jersey City baseball league as service project for his confirmation

BY ROBERT E. MISSECK
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

When Brett Johnson had to come up with a community service project as part of his confirmation, he decided to match his love of baseball with a plan to help a group of needy kids.

The 16-year-old Westfield High School junior began collecting old baseball gloves, bats and shoes, refurbished them and donated the equipment to the Jackie Robinson Baseball League in Jersey City. The process has become an ongoing project Johnson dubbed "Share the Glove." He has continued with college equipment, and set up a website, sharetheglove.org, to bolster donations.

"I just thought that since I like baseball, I could collect stuff for needy kids who

also like to play baseball," said Johnson, a first baseman for the high school's Blue Devils. He has been playing in baseball leagues since he was 6 years old, he said.

"In total, Brett provided over 70 baseball items to less fortunate children," said Joseph Wheatley, a Springfield resident and a close friend of Johnson's. Wheatley, who met Johnson two years ago while coaching the youngster's eighth-grade baseball team at the Roosevelt Intermediate School, said the two established a bond so strong that Johnson asked him to be his sponsor for confirmation.

"I was really humbled by that," said Wheatley, a retired postal worker.

"When Brett found out he was to do a community service project and decided he wanted to collect baseball equipment for needy kids, he called me for advice," he

said. "I went to the principal of his school and explained the project and he was very enthusiastic about it and agreed to set up a collection container in the lobby of the school."

The principal also sent students home with fliers so parents could look through their basements and garages for any old equipment, Wheatley said. A collection container was also set up at St. Helen's Roman Catholic Church in Westfield, where Johnson was confirmed.

"I inspected all of the donated stuff to see what condition they were in," said Johnson, who is the son of Nereida and James Johnson. His dad is an attorney for a firm in Somerville. His brother, Troy, is a college student.

"The ones that were fixable I refurbished," said Johnson.

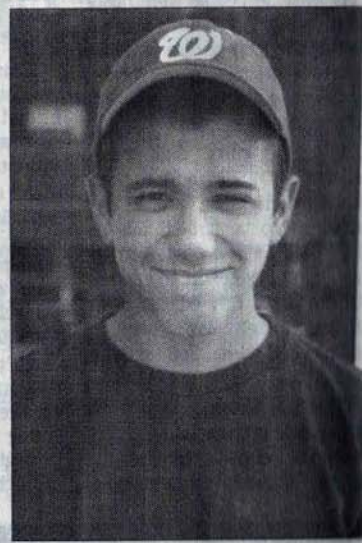
Wheatley said Johnson relaced shoes and fixed the webbing of old gloves. Wheatley said another friend, Lucy Arbus of Westfield, found the Jackie Robinson League in Jersey City and the organization gladly accepted the equipment.

"It helped us out a lot," said Brian Mills, president of the league, which has about 400 youngsters. "A lot of kids can't afford their own gloves and this donation helps the league provide the equipment the kids need. It was a very welcome gift."

Johnson said he plans to add more Share the Glove collection sites in the fall and hopes to have more kids benefit.

"When you Share the Glove, you get to practice all the good things you believe in — from helping people less fortunate, to supporting healthy recreation programs, to

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MICHAEL CUMMO/THE STAR-LEDGER

Brett Johnson, a junior at Westfield High School who loves baseball, collected and refurbished old equipment to donate to needy kids.