



Gonzalez up for Clemente Award

Marlins veteran has made big impact in Florida off the field

By Alden Gonzalez / MLB.com

MIAMI -- Luis Gonzalez came to the Marlins this offseason to serve mostly as a veteran reserve player on the field.

Off the field, however, the 40-year-old might as well be an everyday starter, cleanup hitter and RBI machine.

That's because in his short time in South Florida, Gonzalez has already made a huge impact in the community with his winning personality, dedication to important causes and drive to make a difference.

For that, the veteran outfielder is the Marlins' nomination for the Roberto Clemente Award, presented by Chevrolet. "He's definitely had a huge impact in the community," Marlins assistant of player relations Alex Morin said. "He's always there, willing and able to say a few words, give his time, donate stuff, whatever. "He's a great guy to have on this team."

The Clemente Award -- won by former Astro Craig Biggio last year -- recognizes the player who best exemplifies the game of baseball, sportsmanship, community involvement and the individual's contribution to his team. It is named in honor of the former Pirates outfielder, whose spirit and goodwill will always be remembered. Clemente died in a plane crash while attempting to transport relief supplies to earthquake-stricken Nicaragua on Dec. 31, 1972.

Fans can participate in the selection process of the overall winner of the award now through Oct. 5. The fan ballot winner will be tallied as one vote among those cast by a special selection panel of baseball dignitaries and media members. The panel includes MLB Commissioner Bud Selig and Vera Clemente, widow of the Pirates' Hall of Fame right fielder. The winner will be announced during the World Series.

Gonzalez wasted no time giving back after being acquired on Feb. 7.

During Spring Training in Jupiter, Fla., Gonzalez heard of the passing of a paramedic/firefighter after he was shot, and immediately enlisted the support of Cardinals All-Star first baseman Albert Pujols. Together, they held an auction to raise funds for the family, which raised more than \$5,000. The two winners were treated to a high-end dinner with Gonzalez and Pujols, and the family of the fallen firefighter spent a day at Dolphin Stadium during a Marlins game.

"It was a situation where we had an opportunity to make an impact, and in Spring Training, we were there for six weeks, and if you have an opportunity to try to make a difference, you do it," said Gonzalez, who was nominated for the award in 2003 as a member of the D-backs. "This was a time of a family in need, and it felt like it was something we could do. So I called Albert because both of our clubs share the area, and he was more than willing to help out, being a friend of mine, so we were able to raise some funds for that family."

But Gonzalez's contributions didn't stop there.

He spent a considerable amount of time with a young boy at the ballpark through CBS-4's Children's Trust Project Adoption; served as the player spokesperson for the MLB Players' Association's Buses for Baseball program and got his teammates to visit and spend time with the children from Amigos for Kids; spoke to a group of soldiers from the Wounded Warriors program; provided a full slate of equipment to the Marlins' Senior RBI Team right before it headed to the RBI World Series in Los Angeles; and, in September, he will be hosting "Uncork for a Cause," which benefits the Florida Marlins Community Foundation.

But in all his work, Gonzalez is simply trying to follow in the footsteps of the path the great Clemente created.

"He was a great player, and not only that, he gave back to his community," said Gonzalez, who was named to the President's Council on Service and Civic Participation on Jan. 30, 2003, when he was sworn in as a committee member in the Oval Office. "It's definitely an honor to be chosen from our ballclub to be one of the many recipients to receive this award.

"I always felt like, in playing in this game, you have a huge opportunity to give back to the community. It's always nice to play the game, but it's also nice to be known as a guy who is a normal person like anybody else."