

Yankees great Mariano Rivera donates to Sierra High in surprise visit (video)

By Hannah
Furfaro

NY Yankee great Mariano Rivera provides Sierra High with new instruments & uniforms, to replace ones that have been in use for over 40 years. His charitable foundation provided the much needed gear. Video: John Walker THEFRESNOBEE

TOLLHOUSE — Sierra High School freshman Bryan McCurley pressed two fingers to his lips and then reached out one last time to touch the ragged high school marching band uniform hanging on the door, tattered from 41 years of use by young musicians from generations past.

Then he turned to scan the music room wall, covered by faded photos of students who donned the outfits emblazoned with a vintage “S.”

“Those suits were part of our memories,” Bryan said. “They’ve been with us through thick and thin, even though they’ve caused us so much stress. We’ve had them rip and tear.”

Bryan was sad to say goodbye to the uniforms but ecstatic on Thursday when he and his band mates each got new ones and shiny professional-grade instruments to replace decades-old equipment.

“I’m proud to be in it, I really am,” he said. “But it is like seeing an old band member go away.”

The new maroon and gold-button outfits and the Yamaha instruments were donated by former New York Yankees relief pitcher Mariano Rivera, who made a surprise visit to the eastern Fresno County school Thursday morning. Rivera, who retired after the 2013 season and is considered a shoo-in for the Baseball Hall of Fame, runs a charitable foundation dedicated to kids.

“I’m happy with what I’m doing,” he said about his international charitable work. “When you see kids smiling and happy for what you do, that is the best.”

Rivera heard about Sierra High’s needs from one of his foundation employees, the aunt of Sierra High senior Dylan Baize. Dylan, who plays the clarinet, was chatting with his aunt about school when he mentioned the dilapidated gear. He also told her about the passion of his band director, Bruce Weinberger, and how he had found a family among the band.

Rivera, who turns 45 next week, has small-town roots of his own. He grew up in a Panamanian fishing village, was signed by the Yankees in 1990 and made his major-league debut in 1995 and was the last major-leaguer to wear No. 42 full-time, following its league-wide retirement in honor of Jackie Robinson.

Dylan, 17, knew a surprise was in the works but had no clue Rivera would show up to hand-deliver the gifts.

“Mr. Weinberger was hinting toward the band they would get something new. But we didn’t know we’d get all this,” he said.

The teens hardly had a minute to practice before performing with the new instruments: they’d organized a special school performance at 9 a.m. Thursday in honor of the donations.

As the students laced up their shoes and adjusted their new hats with feathery black plumes, Weinberger looked on

proudly from the corner.

The soft-spoken band director lights up when asked about his band. He explained the ancient uniforms, noting he chose to spend his tiny budget on sending students to performances instead of worrying about aesthetics.

He also talked about using skills he learned working at Disneyland one summer as inspiration for leading his students. Weinberger continues to give a nod to that summer: vibrant paintings of Ariel from “The Little Mermaid” and other Disney characters color the band room’s walls; he wore a Mickey Mouse pin on his tie Thursday.

“My philosophy is based on: the kids don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care,” he said. “I’ve applied (Disneyland’s teachings) and it’s been magic.”

Weinberger’s whimsical spirit and paintings on the wall are fitting for the methods he teaches. Unlike other high school marching bands, Sierra High’s band doesn’t compete in contests. Instead, the band of about 100 students prepares hilarious musical performances to entertain the competitive bands who attend competitions.

It’s a tradition, band members say.

“This year we had a ‘Star Wars’ field show and we all got light sabers and we had these light saber battles,” said sophomore sousaphone player Connor Dunkle. During his freshman year, the band dressed up as a bunch of lunch ladies for a show.

Connor, who was wrapped in his new gigantic brass instrument that resembles a tuba, said the Sierra High band deserves to be recognized. He recalled his old instrument, dotted with pieces of duct tape to keep the valves in place.

“In my mind it’s like (going) from a piece of dirt to a golden medal,” he said.

As the students finished tuning their instruments, Weinberger called for quiet before the big debut.

“Dreams really do come true,” he said in salute to Walt Disney. “I love you all, let’s go do this.”

Contact Hannah Furfaro: hfurfaro@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6412 or [@HannahFurfaro](https://twitter.com/HannahFurfaro) on Twitter.

Copyright

© 2014 www.fresnobee.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.fresnobee.com>