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Braves alumni step up to plate to help vet groups

by Emily Boorstein

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John Rocker

MARIETTA — Atlanta Braves alumni including Brian Jordan, Ryan Klesko, Marquis Grissom and John Rocker are pitching in Sunday to help veterans organizations, including a nonprofit with ties to a Marietta church.

The 2014 Warrior Softball Classic is at Coolray Field, the home of the Gwinnett Braves in Lawrenceville. Gates open at 12:30 p.m. and activities include an autograph-signing session with former Braves players before they take to the field for a home run derby and softball game against active and retired military personnel.



Ernest Easley

The derby is set for 1:45 p.m. and the softball game starts about an hour later, according to Rocker, the spokesman for Homeless Veterans, Inc., one of the beneficiaries of the event.

The former relief pitcher, who also played for Cleveland, Texas and Tampa Bay before retiring in 2003, joked he may be dreading the softball game.

“I’m not looking forward to it because of the home field whoopin’ I think we’re gonna take,” Rocker said, adding many of the military players have spent time playing with a traveling softball team consisting of veterans who play 40 to 50 games a year. “So (they’re) bringing a bunch of ringers to the game to play against some of my bunch of old, fat, retired buddies.”

Rocker said Homeless Veterans, Inc., provides services such as housing, job training through a partnership with Georgia Tech and counseling, as well as help with clerical skills, communication skills and job placement.

He said the organization hopes to send veterans back out into community on their own within 12 to 14 months after getting them off the street.

“People don’t become homeless by accident, you know, they were once soldiers,” said Rocker, who now lives in Sandy Springs and devotes his time to serving Homeless Veterans Inc. He said the organization has found veterans generally become homeless one of two ways: “It’s either psychiatric issues — traumatic brain injuries, PTSD or whatever — or chemical addiction,” he said.

“That’s probably 80 percent 90 percent of the reason these individuals become homeless,” Rocker continued, “so we have counseling set up through Roswell Street Baptist Church. We have six counselors over there that begin counseling the men that come into our program and start treating the issues that cause them to become homeless.”

The church’s Senior Pastor Ernest Easley said it’s one thing to put a roof over veterans’ heads, but it is another to help them come to terms with issues that range from emotional problems to drugs to “dealing with some of the horrors of war they have seen.”

"These men and women come back differently and they need help," Easley said. "By helping them get their life right spiritually (through the Christian counseling his church provides), it will help them in the other areas of their lives."

Easley said he'll be at Coolray Field on Sunday, and encouraged the community to come along to help veterans "who are hurting."

He said people can donate scrap metal at the church starting in November, with all proceeds going toward Homeless Veterans Inc.

Admission on Sunday is \$10 for children, \$15 for veterans and \$20 general admission. Tickets can be purchased in advance at warriorsoftballclassic.com. Coolray Field is at 2500 Buford Drive in Lawrenceville.

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