



Image from National Museum of American History

“Anytime you have an opportunity to make a difference in this world and you don’t, then you are wasting your time on earth.”

- Roberto Clemente

Roberto Clemente Walker is a baseball legend. Born in 1934 in Carolina, Puerto Rico, he was the youngest of seven siblings. His father ran a strict household and was a disciplined man. He worked as the foreman at a sugar cane plantation where Roberto and his siblings often worked to support the family. He grew up attending a local Christian church with his mother, who was known for her friendly and welcoming personality. In fact, it was his mother who taught him his favorite Christian hymn: “*Solo Dios hace el hombre feliz. Solo Dios hace el hombre feliz. Todo se acaba. Solo Dios hace el hombre feliz.*” That translates to: “Only God makes a man happy. Only God makes a man happy. Life is fleeting. Only God makes a man happy.” His faith and family gave him the foundational values on which he would base his life and work.

Roberto was always athletic. He excelled at track and field and could have represented Puerto Rico at the Olympics, but decided to concentrate on baseball which, he had been playing from a young age on the streets of his neighborhood. He would later say: “I am convinced that God wanted me to be a baseball player. I was born to play baseball.” At the age of seventeen, Roberto’s professional baseball career began with the *Cangrejeros de Santurce* (the Crabbers) in the Puerto Rican Professional Baseball League. In 1952, Roberto was noticed by scouts for the Brooklyn Dodgers who gave him a \$10,000 signing bonus. In 1954, he was claimed by the Pittsburgh Pirates with whom he would spend the rest of his career.

Roberto would play major league baseball from 1955 to 1972. By the end of his career, he was remembered as one of the greatest players to ever play professional baseball. He was named to the National League All-Star team each year during the 1960s and won a Gold Glove award every year from 1961 until his final season in 1972. He was the first

Hispanic player to be named league MVP, World Series MVP, and elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown. He is remembered today by baseball fans as “The Great One.”

“My husband was a very religious man. His faith guided him to help others.” - Vera Clemente (his wife)

Yet, for Roberto, fame and awards were not his goal. His love for the United States led him to enlist as an infantryman in the U.S. Marine Corp Reserves, where he served for six years while still maintaining his baseball career. He also wanted to serve and represent the people of Puerto Rico and Latin America. As a black man from Puerto Rico, he faced racism and prejudice throughout his career. He spoke out against segregation and Jim Crow laws in the United States, and was known for his outspokenness and commitment to civil rights for all people. To the people of Puerto Rico, he remains a symbol of national pride for both his success in baseball and his humanitarian efforts. His devout Catholic faith and his wife Vera’s example were guiding influences that motivated him to help others.



Image from The Florida Times-Union, BCT Archives

For those reasons, he spent much of his time in the off-season involved in humanitarian work and acts of charity. After a large earthquake struck Nicaragua in 1972, Roberto led an effort to supply the devastated area with shipments of supplies. When the supplies were rerouted by corrupt officials, he decided to accompany the next shipment himself. The DC-7 plane

he chartered to deliver the supplies crashed in the Atlantic Ocean upon takeoff, and he and four others aboard were killed.

Today, the Roberto Clemente Award is given annually by Major League Baseball to the player who best represents the game of Baseball through extraordinary character, community involvement, and contributions on and off the field. It is one of baseball’s most prestigious awards. It is fittingly named for a man who was known for his personal integrity and commitment to others. Roberto’s brother, Martino, described his brother’s care for people, saying: “He saw that you were having a hard time, and he would go out of his way to try and help you. He’d say, ‘If God gave me this gift, and he gave this to me when others don’t have anything then I [should] reach out to help them.’” Roberto Clemente is a modern-day hero. He was a true humanitarian whose faith motivated him to care and provide for others.



**Life is fleeting.
Only God makes a man happy.**



Key Questions

1. Roberto Clemente was a man of devout faith. How did that faith shape his life? Identify another great humanitarian guided by faith.
2. Imagine you are tasked with creating a college scholarship named in Roberto’s honor. Which of his many noble qualities would you use to select recipients of the scholarship? What would you name it?

Sources

- 1 “Clemente’s Family and Legacy,” *PBS: American Experience* (accessed October 2, 2023): [web](#)
- 2 Bruce Markusen, *Roberto Clemente: The Great One* (Champagne: Sports Publishing, LLC, 2001).
- 3 “Roberto’s Story,” *Roberto Clemente Foundation* (accessed Sept. 30, 2023): [web](#).
- 4 “The Great One: Roberto Clemente,” *National Museum of American History* (accessed Sept. 30, 2023): [web](#).
- 5 Kal Wagenheim, *Clemente! The Enduring Legacy* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2010).