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Sports

Chaykun: Fans, friends gather to remember Vernon, one of the good guys

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CHESTER — There were former major-league players and a Negro League all-star in attendance.

There were family members and family friends as well as neighbors from his hometown and the other towns in which he lived.

There also were those who considered themselves lucky just to be called his friend.

They gathered at Widener University's Lathem Hall Saturday afternoon to remember Mickey Vernon, the Marcus Hook native who died in September at the age of 90.

Vernon, two-time American League batting champion as a member of the Washington Senators, was remembered in a special program entitled "Celebrating A Life Well-Lived."

Jim Vankoski, the former Strath Haven High teacher and coach and ex-president of the Delco Baseball League, put the memorial service together with the help of Vernon's daughter, Gay, who lives in Sharon, Mass.

After more than two hours of video clips and personal remembrances, Gay Vernon concluded the celebration by speaking about her life with her famous father then helped lead the crowd in a "seventh-inning stretch," which included a rousing rendition of "Take Me Out To The Ball Game."

"The best things I have — and all of you have — are our memories," she said. "My dad didn't teach me how to live with his words. He just lived and I just watched."

That was the theme around which so many of those who spoke chose to remember Vernon Saturday. The words of Branch Rickey, who helped bring Jackie Robinson to the big leagues 60 years ago, often came to mind: "He was just as much a man as he was a ball player, and he was all of both."

One of the first video clips Vankoski showed had Vernon talking about playing in Washington, D.C.

"It was a thrill," Vernon said. "I got to meet a lot of presidents who were big baseball fans and I was doing something that I wanted to do."

On the video screen the audience could see President John F. Kennedy throw out the first ball on opening day in Griffith Stadium in 1962. Vankoski noted that Saturday marked the 45th anniversary of Kennedy's death in Dallas.

"If John F. Kennedy were still alive this year, he and Mickey would have been about a year apart in age," Vankoski said. "How lucky we were to have had Mickey with us these 45 years since that day the president passed away in Dallas."

As the pictures on the screen changed, there was Vernon as a member of the American League's starting infield in the 1955 All-Star Game. Among his teammates were Ted Williams, Mickey Mantle, Al Kaline and Nellie Fox, all members of the Baseball Hall of Fame.

In less than three weeks, the Veterans Committee will meet to decide whether Vernon will be inducted into the Hall posthumously next July.

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Vernon's last season as a major league player was 1960, when he made nine trips to the plate as a pinch-hitter with the Pittsburgh Pirates. He had spent that summer as the first-base coach in Pittsburgh under manager Danny Murtaugh, the Chester High graduate who had been his long-time friend.

During the winter months, Vernon and Murtaugh worked at McGovern's Men's Store in Chester.

"One day Mr. McGovern had to run to the bank and Mickey and my dad were the only ones left in the store," said Murtaugh's son, Tim, former president of Delaware County Council. "An older gentleman came into the store and said he wanted to buy a suit, so my dad told him he had to measure him and made him lay down on the floor.

"My dad's drawing chalk lines around the man and Mickey's standing there as Mr. McGovern walks in, sees the man and thinks he had a heart attack. Then Patrolman John Taylor, who later became sheriff, comes in and he thinks the place is a crime scene because someone was robbing the store."

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Rich Westcott, former member of the Daily Times sports staff and author of "Mickey Vernon, The Gentleman First Baseman," spoke of all of Vernon's teammates and contemporaries he spoke to in writing his book.

"No one said anything bad about Mickey," Westcott quoted former Senators pitcher Walt Masterson as saying. "If they do, send them to me and I'll have a few things to say to them."

After his book was published, Westcott and Vernon made a number of appearances together.

"Every time I was in his company it was a wonderful experience," Westcott said. "We'd go into the Phillies' clubhouse and the players who learned about Mickey's background were delighted to speak to him and get to know him.

"Cole Hamels learned who Mickey was and was thrilled he had the chance to talk to him. And Jayson Werth came over to him and Mickey started talking right away about how (Werth's) grandfather, Ducky Schofield, was his teammate in Pittsburgh."

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Washington Nationals broadcaster Phil Wood talked about coming to Philadelphia to call a Flyers game against the Washington Capitals and spending the afternoon visiting Vernon.

"I got to his house at 1 o'clock," Wood said. "The hockey game didn't start until 7:30, but I just about made it there in time. He had the silver bat he won for winning the 1953 batting championship in a velvet sleeve and told me to take it down and hold it. A week later I get a Christmas card from Mickey and his wife.

"I had always been a collector of Washington Senators memorabilia. I was having a hard time finding things that had been Mickey's until I went to a show and they had one of his 1955 game jerseys. I asked the guy what he wanted for it and he told me he wanted one of my Ted Williams bats. I was happy to make that trade."

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Stanley Glenn, who played more than 2,000 games in the Negro League, recalled all the places he lived and played.

"Over the years you meet a lot of people," Glenn said. "I never met a nicer person in all my life than Mickey.

"America has lost one of its finest persons, his family has lost a father and a friend and all of us have lost a great ball player."

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Curt Weldon, former mayor of Marcus Hook who spent 20 years as a member of the United States House of Representatives, gave the rebuttal after Vankoski showed a video clip in which Vernon spoke about one of his teachers at Villanova calling Marcus Hook "the last place God built."

"We always talked about how there were two kinds of people in this world," Weldon said. "Those who were from Marcus Hook and those who wished they were."

Weldon spoke of the "humility and caring that were Mickey Vernon's hallmarks."

"I got to go from Marcus Hook to the House," Weldon said. "Mickey went from The Hook to become a Senator."

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James Vernon Firth was Vernon's great-nephew.

"I thank my parents for naming me after such a great man," he said. "He was so much of an inspiration to so many people. God gave him the gift of being a ball player and he gave us the gift of Mickey Vernon."

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Joe "Chubby" Imburgia, a neighbor of Vernon's in Marcus Hook, told of the day he and a friend, who were teenagers, hitch-hiked to Washington, D.C. to see Vernon play in

a doubleheader against the New York Yankees.

“He told us to come over to see him between games and we ended up meeting Joe DiMaggio and shaking hands with him,” Imburgia said.

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Chuck Taylor of Aston, another friend of the Vernon family, recalled the story of how Mickey was looking for an apartment in Washington.

“He found one that to him was just right,” Taylor said. “That was because of how close it was located to an ice cream store. The place was rented before he could get it, but he met someone who lived right near it who let Mickey and his wife live with him.

“A couple weeks later the man sees Mickey and shows him the paper with his picture in it after Mickey got a hit to win a game. Mickey had lived with him all that time and he never said a word to him about playing for the Senators.”

Taylor also told about how entertainer Harry James invited Mickey to a show after a game in New York and told Mickey he wanted him to sit with his wife, actress Betty Grable.

“I don’t trust these guys, but I trust you,” James said.

Taylor also discussed the story of the night the Dorsey Brothers were performing at the El Rancho Club, which was located where Widener University’s Schwartz Center was built.

“They were great baseball fans,” Taylor said. “When they learned Mickey Vernon lived near where they were appearing, they said they had to meet him.

“Hours later they get a call telling them to get to the El Rancho because they were holding up the start of the show and they said to start without them because they couldn’t leave Mickey.”

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After the ceremonies had ended, former Delco League manager Phil Damiani mentioned how impressed he was that Vankoski had put together something so special on such a grand scale.

“I thought he couldn’t outdo himself after what he did with the Delco League’s 100th anniversary dinner,” Damiani said, noting that he hoped Vankoski would have the chance to organize a trip to Cooperstown, N.Y. next July to help the people of Marcus Hook and Delaware County celebrate Vernon’s induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

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