

COMMUNITY

Ex-Slugger Vaughn Remains Key Player In Urban Renewal

By Diane M. Grassi

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NEVADA – It's been quite the spring and summer 2007 seasons for fans of all three major professional sports leagues, but sadly, for many of the wrong reasons. As fans have been inundated with stories of crimes, misdemeanors and the ethical transgressions by society's ordained role models, even including those who officiate and manage games, it is but refreshing to step back and revisit a former player who more recently reappeared on the radar.

Former MLB player Mo Vaughn, actually may prove more exemplary in his post-playing career than he was during his 12 years on a baseball diamond. In

August 2007, he was featured on ESPN's *Outside the Lines*, following brief reports in Sports Illustrated and the New York Post, among other news outlets, recalling his latest ventures.

But the publicity he received sold short the true essence and importance of the work Mr. Vaughn is doing and the mission on which he remains. As such, it deserves more in-depth coverage than that of just a feel-good story.

Most ardent baseball fans will remember Mo as the burly, intimidating first baseman who played for the Boston Red Sox from 1991 until 1998, during which time he was the 1995 American League MVP, with a .336 batting average, 39 home runs and 113 RBI in that year, while steering the Red Sox to post-season berths in both 1995 and 1996.

He also, however, was singled out as having one of the most lucrative contracts in MLB at the time, earning \$18.3 million over his last three years with the Bosox.

Mo also helped sell a lot of newspapers over his 12-year career, starting with the rift he had with Red Sox management in 1997 and 1998, more so than his stellar 1995 season in Boston. He then chose to sign as a free agent with the Anaheim Angels in 1998, which paid him a guaranteed \$88 million through the 2004 season.

At that time it became the highest MLB contract ever offered. But Mo was plagued with injuries in both the 1999 and 2000 seasons and was on the disabled list for the entirety of 2001. He never lived up to his previous star billing. Relations with the Angels organization became strained and Mo left on less than stellar terms there as well.

The Angels were more than glad to trade Mo to the New York Mets for pitcher Kevin Appier, who helped them to earn a World Series Championship in 2002. And the Mets accommodated Mo with a three-year \$42 million contract, partially subsidized by the Angels, but fully insured. Mo welcomed the trade to NY in a new league, where he expected to play through 2004, but it never came to

pass.

Still recovering from biceps surgery in 2001 and additionally dealing with chronic knee and hamstring problems made many NY fans skeptical of the signing of Vaughn by former Mets GM, Steve Phillips, now making his living as a baseball analyst for ESPN.

As feared, Mo wound up playing poorly in 2002 and in only 27 games in 2003 before being diagnosed with a permanently damaged knee, only repairable with a knee replacement, thus ending his career. Mets executives felt Mo did not do enough to keep his weight under control, which they believed was a contributing factor to his injuries.

But despite his truncated career, he had impressive stats as a 3-time All Star, and AL MVP, with 328 career home runs and a .293 lifetime batting average. Mo Vaughn was Big Papi before Big Papi was Big Papi.

He was an imposing figure in the batters box and had a commanding presence in any lineup. Had he stayed healthy and continued to produce, Mo could have had a Hall of Fame career.

And both Mo's fans and critics are likely to have a difficult time in finding fault with what appears to be his true calling, in providing hope and facilitating life altering changes in the lives of thousands of inner city residents.

While many current and former athletes do donate funds for worthwhile causes, it is more along the lines of charity dinners and celebrity golf tournaments. But Mo has transcended his celebrity lifestyle and has rededicated his life's goals.

Since 2005, Vaughn has invested his time, resources and good will in rebuilding housing projects, left to decay by slumlords as well as ignored by local government agencies, leaving law-abiding residents to fend for themselves. The collateral damage of such negligence and the oft-ignored outcry from those in these impoverished communities caught Mo's attention.

Mo and his partner, his former lawyer-agent, Eugene Schneur, who both own and operate Omni New York, LLC, have taken on deteriorated housing developments, primarily in New York City, which have gone decades without adequate maintenance or services. The sole objective is to restore them by giving them back to their deserved communities.

Mo grew up in Connecticut, went to prep school in Pawling, NY and then played college baseball for 3 years at Seton Hall College in New Jersey, so he is quite familiar with the tri-state NY area.

But what Mo did not necessarily know was how many people in housing projects for lower income residents have been living in squalor, without security in drug-infested neighborhoods, while suffering from problems with such basic services as running water, heat, or working elevators in high-rise buildings.

One of the main complaints fans have about their sports heroes is that they either forget where they came from, or have no inkling about the communities for which they play, some of which are in deplorable condition mere blocks from the stadiums in which they play.

The chicken banquet circuit is fine, but it nowhere nearly supplants the real work needed to be done in such communities all across the country, where more often than not, "blighted communities" are being bought up by real estate moguls who turn them into multi-million dollar complexes for the rich, in what were once flourishing working class neighborhoods, made up of regular folk.

Since teaming up with Schneur at the end of 2004, Vaughn has closed on numerous projects with the City of NY, and in Westchester, Nassau and Seneca counties in NY State. Omni has creatively crafted contracts in collaborating with numerous federal, state and local government agencies and various government programs in order to secure financing for their renovation projects.

The federal agency, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the NY State Division of Housing and Community Renewal (SDHCR) and the Housing Development Corporation (HDC) of New York City are but some of the agencies with which Omni has relationships. Municipal and industrial bonds, tax abatements, tax credits and tax-free loans are additional sources of funding.

Omni NY has proven to be quite a success since 2005 with Vaughn more than living up to his promises, having renovated over 1500 individual housing units in NYC alone. He stresses security and safety first for tenants and installs state of the art security cameras along with employing the necessary security personnel.

His promise is also not to displace tenants during renovations that include replacing boilers, plumbing, roofing, windows, building facades, elevators, installing new appliances, kitchen cabinets, floor tiles, and renovated lobbies and common areas. Vaughn's Omni is a true example of how Public Private Partnerships (PPP) should work.

Omni's hope is to expand its sites beyond NY to parts of Boston, MA and Miami, FL in 2007 and into 2008 and has looked at numerous other states as well, collaborating with other developers. "It is the mission of Omni NY to ensure that people are able to live in decent, quality housing and have a sense of pride where they live," says Vaughn.

And his style is not to make a fast buck and disappear but to continue to manage each of the properties he restores, in order to ensure that both the properties and the tenants are protected and serviced adequately into the future.

In addition, Vaughn has become a social director of sorts, applying for grants in these communities where after-school programs for school children are held on the properties, along with vocational skills programs for young adults and those forced to change careers in mid-life.

It is obvious that Omni NY is unique in scope and in fulfilling its goals in the way it structures its deals in the best interest of people. But more importantly, Vaughn has become a facilitator on behalf of those individuals in communities which have no voice or have lost their way in negotiating through bureaucratic minefields in order to maintain decent lives. And in that respect, perhaps Mo Vaughn has found his niche and is filling a vital need where government has failed its obligations.

In conclusion, whatever disappointments Mo may have been to fans or to the organizations for which he played, not unlike other players who fail to remain healthy or play past their prime, he may prove to be far more valuable an asset now that he is out of baseball.

For as he says, "I don't know how people view me, but we know we are doing the right thing here, and that's what it's all about. I want to make a difference."

Makes one think -- when God made Mo, the mold may have finally been broken.

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