

Vaughn is in rebuilding mode Housing issues on his plate now

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NEW YORK — In his playing days, Mo Vaughn honored Jackie Robinson by wearing No. 42. Now he's following in his hero's footsteps again.

"I felt I wore the number for the right reasons, and all of a sudden you're doing things that mirror what your hero had done," says Vaughn, managing director of Omni New York LLC, which buys low-income housing, then renovates and manages the properties to provide affordable housing through government-issued tax credits.

Still not 40 years old, Vaughn is dressed in a black sports jacket and white shirt — and wearing the trademark earrings — as he tours one of his renovated properties, deep in Yankee territory.

Despite some extra padding, he is instantly recognizable as the Hit Dog, the 1995 American League Most Valuable Player for the Red Sox, with whom he spent the best part of a 12-year career that included stints with the Angels and Mets. Vaughn is still slightly gimpy walking down stairs, a reminder of his arthritic left knee that forced him to retire at age 35.

Since forming the company with his lawyer, Eugene Schneur, in December 2004, Vaughn has contracted to remodel 1,142 units in the New York metro area, some in projects that have been plagued by murders, drug dealing, and third-world conditions. They have also purchased property in Cheyenne, Wyo., and are negotiating in Miami and Las Vegas.

But it was not until they purchased the Whitney Young Manor in Yonkers, N.Y., earlier this year that Vaughn discovered the property was the first development built by the Jackie Robinson Construction Company.

"He was very serious . . . about his construction company," wrote Arnold Rampersad in his book, "Jackie Robinson: A Biography." "He was very pleased when his group at last broke ground on its first major effort: Whitney Young Manor, a development of 197 units in Yonkers, New York, named after the former National Urban League director, who had drowned tragically on a visit to Nigeria."

Robinson formed the company in 1970 but he died of a heart attack at age 53 in his Stamford, Conn., home in October 1972, before the building was completed. Omni purchased the building earlier this year for \$17 million and plans to make \$9 million in improvements. Vaughn finds the coincidence downright eerie.

"It's like somebody was holding my hand," he says. "It's tremendous."

Robinson, who broke baseball's color barrier in 1947, had his number retired by Major League Baseball in 1997. Vaughn and others who were wearing 42 were allowed to keep it for the remainder of their careers.

Vaughn's parents were teachers. He grew up in Connecticut and attended prep school and Seton Hall, where his baseball coach told him to honor Robinson's legacy. Vaughn says it inspired him.

"I look at it more appreciative of him," says Vaughn. "He is on a different level in my mind than all other athletes. He was a mental warrior to make it through."

'He has made it better'

Less than 3 miles from Yankee Stadium is Thessalonica Court, the Apartment Building That Mo Rebuilt.

Several kids intercept Vaughn in the improved glass lobby, which has been the scene of several shootings. Vaughn inspects moldings and proudly shows off a redone kitchen with new cabinets.

"I am a stickler for detail," he says. "We try to give people back their self-esteem."

But security cameras are everywhere.

"Cameras are the best deterrent," says Vaughn, standing in front of a bank of mini-monitors. "You're going to be photographed. It stops a whole lot of garbage. If we see someone breaks a light outside Floor 8 Apartment C, we can actually call it up on DVD. Then a big van shows up with all ex-cops and you're going to pay money to make it right or you're going to be evicted."

Vaughn says the cameras made the drug dealers move out.

He also says he would love to build affordable housing in Boston.

"I don't know how people view me in Boston, but we know we are doing the right thing here, and that's what it's all about," he says.

Joseph Tirado, 17, hands a baseball to Vaughn, who proudly shows off a new playground painted in "what we tried to match up as Fenway green."

Vaughn signs on the sweet spot.

"He's here a lot," say Tirado. "And he has made it better."

Vaughn says this is no silent partner/celebrity name venture.

"It doesn't work that way at all," he contends. "You can't be a silent partner and get the backing of the people to do this job. You have to be out front and present."

"I know all the heads of the government agencies, state agencies. It's taken time. We've all sat down and built relationships, and that's the reason why we're having some success. The state gives you their money and they expect you to perform a service. Ninety-five percent of the landlords have not."

He made \$100 million playing baseball, so what's he doing in the South Bronx?

"In 2003, I was 35 years old," he says. "What am I going to do with myself? I didn't want to hang around as an ex-player. I always felt a test of a man was how he was going to evolve and transform himself from an athlete to the next level. So when I went into business, I wanted to be something formidable. I want to make a difference."

Vaughn says this isn't about feeling guilty for playing only two injury-plagued, subpar seasons in New York before retiring in January 2004.

"I got paid for what I had done," says Vaughn, who was making \$15 million a year. "In baseball, that's how they do things. I didn't owe anybody anything. I wasn't a disabled list guy. I came to play and I played hard."

"I didn't feel any guilt from that, and I end up in NY and create a business that my idol was involved with. There's nothing here to be sorry about."

Career went into tailspin

Vaughn put up impressive numbers with the Red Sox, but his last season in Boston (1998) was marred when he crashed his truck returning from a strip club in Providence. Although he was found not guilty of drunk driving, he battled with team management and then signed a six-year, \$88 million free agent deal with Anaheim.

He injured his ankle falling into a dugout while chasing a pop foul in his first game with the Angels in 1999, and in some ways, that small step launched Vaughn into bigger things.

"I wanted to be a Hall of Famer, and it didn't happen," says Vaughn, who finished with 328 homers, 1,064 RBIs, and a .293 batting average. "I got to Anaheim and I fall in the dugout. And I start the downward spiral of my career."

He missed the entire 2001 season with a ruptured tendon in his left arm, and hit just .190 with 3 homers and 15 RBIs in 27 games for the Mets in 2003.

Vaughn says he was "devastated" when doctors told him he risked permanent damage if he continued to play.

"I get the questions all the time," he says. "What if you could change anything? No, because where I am right now is a tremendous position. I've been very, very fortunate."

But while it's rewarding to provide quality housing, "Nothing beats hitting a home run in the bottom of the ninth to win a game," he says.

He has not returned to Fenway Park "since the day I left" but he fantasizes about wearing a disguise and sitting in the stands to check out the renovations. "I hear it came out great," he says.

He insists that leaving Boston was not about money. He felt disrespected.

"I'm disappointed, there's no doubt about that," he says. "I think I'll always be disappointed. I think that I haven't changed my personality from the day I got there to the day I left there. Money hasn't changed me. Success and failure hasn't changed me.

"I'm happy for the Red Sox as a team and their fans because I believe totally they deserved to finally [win]. I felt that when that final out was made in St. Louis, it erased all the demons in all of us that played the game and wore that uniform for any period of time.

"It was almost like something came off of me. I remember I was sitting in Miami. It was like a ghost fell off of me or something like that. It was weird."

Vaughn is told that his career numbers compare favorably with David Ortiz's.

"Big Papi is better than me," Vaughn insists. "He delivers. A championship is what separates people. When I see him at the plate, I think of myself. You know, it's funny. I'm glad he's doing so well. I remember David when he was a kid playing for Minnesota. I know David very well and I'm happy for him.

"I know what it feels like to have that back-to-back force of Ortiz and then [Manny] Ramirez. I had it with Jose Canseco. Both of them together is just devastating."

Vaughn says he was in the dark about steroids.

"The most homers I hit was 44," he says. "I was tired. I had no idea that stuff was going on -- maybe because I didn't need it.

"I was shocked, to be honest with you. I was shocked completely when stuff started coming out. And the numbers started rising. Jose didn't come out for the goodness of the game, though. Jose came out for himself."

Now Vaughn feels energized.

"Coming into New York, I thought I was going to see my name up in lights in the baseball world," he says. "Now I'm going to see my name up in lights in a different world." ■