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Baseball star's son shares love of game with needy children

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Jan. 10, 2012 Conversations with Sr. Camille

Gil Hodges [1] is a name that evokes admiration akin to idolatry. An enduring figure in the annals of baseball, his career spanned 18 years and three teams. During the 1950s, when he played with the Brooklyn Dodgers, he hit 30 home runs per season for five years. In the late 1960s, he became manager of the Mets, leading them to the World Series.

His son, Gil Hodges Jr., was born and raised in Brooklyn, N.Y. He went to a Catholic elementary school and both Catholic and public high schools. After he graduated from C.W. Post College on Long Island, he was drafted by the New York Mets, but a shoulder injury prevented his pursuit of the sport for which his father was famous.

He turned then to securities, becoming the vice president and director of operations for The Homefront Protective Group. Gil, 61, is also the executive director of the Gil Hodges Organization for Children & Families, created to continue his father's spirit and legacy.

Camille: Gil, what's it like to live in the shadow of a famous father?
Hodges: You know, when people talk about my dad, they talk about Gil Hodges, the baseball player, or they talk about the all-star first baseman for the Brooklyn Dodgers, or the underdog manager of the '69 World Champion Miracle Mets. What you don't hear about is Gil Hodges, the devout Catholic. Although my dad loved baseball, his faith was something he held in much higher regard. My dad instilled the importance of a good Catholic upbringing in my sisters and me. He would tell us that faith completes the family and a family is incomplete without faith. I didn't really understand that until I had a family of my own. My dad also taught us about serving the community and giving back to others, something he did anonymously and often.

What impact did his sudden death have on you?
When a massive heart attack took my father's life two days before his 48th birthday, I faced two possibilities: to embellish and respect everything he had accomplished in his life or turn away from that. I decided to continue

his legacy because I recognize that as a great honor. As the only male -- I have three sisters -- I got to travel with him in summers. I spent good time with him, absorbing a great culture in which he excelled as a baseball star and manager. I learned the different sides of the game and the man.

Did people treat you differently because of him?
Yes, for lots of reasons. When I was 17 I was stopped for a moving violation. I knew I was 100 percent wrong. The policeman, scowling, took my license and registration. He returned them with these words: "I can't give you a ticket because two weeks ago your father stopped and helped my mother change her tire."

So that relief had nothing to do with his baseball prowess.
No. It just showed his goodness off the field away from the fans. He was the same person wherever he was.

In what ways are you like him?
I try to be a good Catholic. I learned that from my father. Even when we were on road trips we'd get up early go to Mass before heading to the ballpark. I try to be concerned about other people. He was that way with all his players, even though they were not all as good as Tom Seaver. This was an interesting lesson. Even though I was so far into the forest, I could still see the trees.

How are you different?
I've outlived him by 11 years. I know I don't have as much patience as he had and I'm not as good as I can be.

What about your faith is most meaningful to you?
Its beliefs matter. They've taught me much through life. They gave clear guidelines, even though I haven't followed all of them. For instance, I haven't always been able to turn the other cheek. I can look back and describe ways I could have been better. I learned to respect other religions; people follow what's right for them. I don't understand some of the other faiths. In fact, I'm still trying to appreciate mine more fully.

Do you have a favorite Scripture passage?
The Wedding Feast of Cana. I find this endearing because it helps me better understand the complexity of Jesus' relationship with his mother. Although divine, he was still her son. In Cana, he had to remind her who he was as well. He seems to say, Don't forget who I am. I find myself comparing that relationship with the one I share with my mom. I'm close to her, but sometimes she drives me a little crazy.

Your mother is of Italian descent, your father was Irish and German. Did that make a difference?
My father was soft-spoken, but our home wasn't run like a democracy. We didn't get to vote on what went on. Being punished meant having to spend time in my room. The truth is we were so busy all the time we didn't have many chances to get in trouble.

Do you have a favorite image of God?
Yes. When I think of God, I see the face of Our Lord with a wreath of thorns around his head. It reminds me of what Jesus did for us. That image has been unchanging for me.

When you were young you caught your father's love of the game but were unable to follow your dream. How do you satisfy that interest?
In one way, our family is pleased that my dad has bridges, schools and Little Leagues across the country named after him, but we wanted more of a living memorial. In 2008, we founded the Gil Hodges Organization for Children & Families. Through this organization, we help needy children discover and enjoy sports. We do this first and foremost in Brooklyn, where we were all born and raised. We chose to run this organization ourselves so we could keep control of it.

You were recently honored by the Dorothy Bennett Mercy Center for sending busloads of poor children to Citifield for their first experience of Mets games.

It's an honor for me to be able to help out in this way.

What in your personal life gives you joy?
My family. I have three great children: Gil III, Kelly Elizabeth and Taylor Samantha. They are wonderful and successful in their professions. I wish I'd been able to teach my kids that marriage should be forever. As of now none has gotten married.

My own two marriages ended in divorce, the first after 19 years, the second after three. The first divorce was hard on Kelly. She was a teenager. When I learned that her class was performing, I told her I wanted to attend. She replied, "Under no circumstance do I want you there."

Nevertheless, I managed to get in to watch her perform. Then I went backstage. When she saw me there, she was angry.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked.

"You're my daughter for the rest of my life," I said.

She softened and answered, "You're my dad and I'm your daughter."

Gil, how do you pray?
Every day, as I get older, I find myself being more thankful. I felt a tremendous fear as I was getting closer to the age my father died.

What helped you overcome that fear, besides the fact that you outlived your dad?
A family friend, Joe Falco, had a great influence on my life. This good man was told that he had only three months to live. When he was asked what he planned to do with his time, he replied, "I have to go to work tomorrow." He did and, despite the prognosis, he lived four years longer. He even worked on the day he died. He's one of many people I pray for at Mass. The list of those who've gone before me is getting longer all the time.

What do you want from Catholicism?
Some more progressive thinking, including some lessening of restrictions regarding the priesthood. I'd like priests to be allowed to marry. I'd like them to be more involved in the community. When I was an altar boy, the priest was the closest thing to God we had. That image has become tarnished. I see the future church needing more deacons and married priests.

What gives you joy?
Seeing people happy. Children, especially. Our organization in their behalf is a source of joy for me.

What makes you sad?
In the wider world, anger saddens me, and the way people twist and turn religion for their financial benefits. I find this hard to comprehend. I'm saddened by the sacrifice of human life and consider the Nazi concentrations camps the greatest sinful creation.

Do you have your own code to live by?
I want to keep practicing my faith. It helps me to live well one day at a time. On the days we fail, we shouldn't persecute ourselves. Just make the next day stronger. It's okay to get knocked down as long as you can keep on getting up.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, has written a soon-to-be-published book titled *Stories of Forgiveness*

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[1] http://www.gilhodges.com/index.php

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