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## WKU students to support Puerto Rican baseball teams through fundraiser

By AARON MUDD [amudd@bgdailynews.com](mailto:amudd@bgdailynews.com) 13 hrs ago

The husband-and-wife team of James Marlin and Vanessa Lopez will open their San Juan Smokehouse restaurant next week in the former Brickyard Café building.

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By DON SERGENT/[dsergent@bgdailynews.com](mailto:dsergent@bgdailynews.com)

Two years after Hurricane Maria – a storm that caused billions of dollars in damage in Puerto Rico and an estimated 2,975 attributable deaths – there’s perhaps nothing that brings the island’s people closer together than baseball.

“It’s akin to a religion. It has that kind of fervor,” said Bernard Strenecky, a scholar-in-residence at Western Kentucky University.

Young people with talent in the sport train in special academies, spending half the day studying in school and the other half on the field, he said.

“They do baseball like you would engineering or anything else,” he said.

So, when Strenecky and his students living in WKU’s \$100 Solution House sought a way to help people in Puerto Rico, baseball seemed like a great place to start.

For the second year in a row, his students will be continuing the Play Ball Puerto Rico project, which donates equipment and funds to youth baseball teams there.

On March 12, students will lead a fundraiser beginning at 5:30 p.m. at San Juan Smokehouse to benefit Play Ball Puerto Rico. The event will feature Puerto Rican cuisine, a silent auction with items donated by local sponsors and a short video highlighting the project's work in Puerto Rico.

A standard ticket is \$50 and available by contacting Kirsten Linder with WKU's Housing and Residence Life at 270-745-4359 or by email at [kirsten.lindner@wku.edu](mailto:kirsten.lindner@wku.edu). Student tickets are \$15, but they can get a \$5 discount for bringing two pieces of gently used baseball equipment to donate.

Strenecky oversees the \$100 Solution House and sees his students – and all WKU students – as having a moral responsibility to their fellow citizens, which the house promotes as a living learning community. Students get to live in the house in exchange for conducting service projects funded by micro-grants.

Play Ball Puerto Rico grew out of an idea by Strenecky's grandson, 15-year-old Lawson Strenecky of Nelson County, when he was 14. After seeing the devastation in Puerto Rico, Strenecky said his grandson wanted to do something. Being an athlete, Lawson gravitated toward baseball.

Using connections his grandfather formed while working at Semester at Sea, a study abroad program, Lawson raised thousands of dollars through online GoFundMe campaigns.

Lawson's work eventually led to a partnership with the Louisville Slugger Museum and Factory that donated \$19,000 worth of money and equipment, Strenecky said of his grandson. Louisville Slugger has even donated a custom bat to the silent auction painted like the Puerto Rican flag, Strenecky said.

"We ended up assisting five teams," Strenecky said, adding that exceeded their initial goal of just one team.

Now, with the project led by WKU students, it's passing on the \$100 Solution concept to young people in Puerto Rico. Teams get donated equipment, but they also get \$100 grant to start their own service projects.

The projects start by prompting students to look inward and ask what they can do to make their communities better places to live and learn, Strenecky said. The catch is that it has to be sustainable beyond the scope of the project and fit within the limits of a \$100 grant.

Of all the things a student learns in college, Strenecky said, this is perhaps the most vital lesson they can leave with.

“This is teaching citizenship in its rawest form,” he said.

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## Aaron Mudd

Education reporter. Covers education and related issues, focusing primarily on the Bowling Green and Warren County public school districts and Western Kentucky University.

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