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Williams icon strives to keep legacy alive

The Ted Williams Museum and Hitters Hall of Fame explores several options in an effort to boost revenue for the baseball institution.

By DAWN REISS
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CITRUS HILLS - Patient and precise, Ted Williams always waited at the plate until the ball reached a finite area in the strike zone.

Operators of his public namesake - the Ted Williams Museum and Hitters Hall of Fame - hope public donors who have been holding out will do the same, and start sending money.

Both the museum's executive director, David McCarthy, and director of Florida operations, Mike Colabelli, said this week funds are running out for the museum that opened in February 1994.

"We don't want anyone to think we are near bankruptcy or going to close our doors," said McCarthy, who was a trustee of Ted Williams' estate and the former head of his security team. "But if things don't drastically turn around, as far as getting large donations, then the museum could be in serious financial trouble."

With operating expenses of more than \$10,000 a month, Colabelli said the museum is property rich and cash poor.

"We aren't in debt," McCarthy said. "But everyone sees this beautiful building and assumes we have tons of money."

McCarthy said the museum's property and building are paid off, and they have money in the bank - just not enough to maintain its current level of operation.

Colabelli and McCarthy both say that the museum did not receive an endowment or any money from Williams' estate. Instead, Williams donated items before his death; the combination of those items and public donations have made the museum worth several million dollars. Claudia Williams, the Splendid Splinter's youngest daughter, has also helped fill the void, McCarthy said.

"The items are far more valuable than the money he could have left," he said. "Claudia has stepped up and given us a tremendous amount of items, to help support the museum and to give as gifts to players who visit."

McCarthy mentioned that when Williams was alive, players came to visit him as a friend. Now the museum gives gifts or, like some other nonprofit organizations, pays players to make appearances. Another factor is the battle over the cryonic preservation of Williams' remains after his death on July 5, 2002.

"Anything like that is controversial," McCarthy said. "It is going to affect us. People call us with their sympathies. They call yelling at us. I remind them that it is a family situation. We have nothing to say over that."

"Does it affect us? Yes. In some ways, it created a real curiosity, and the public has wanted to see what Ted Williams is all about."

On the flip-side, many have stayed away.


In November, the operators sought and received \$5,000 from the Tourist Development Council to help them meet goals to increase the number of visitors by 50 percent.



[Times photo: Stephen Coddington]

Operators of the Ted Williams Museum and Hitters Hall of Fame in Citrus Hills are discussing several ideas to generate revenue to maintain operations.

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Half of that came back to the council itself when the museum spent \$2,500 to participate in advertising programs with the tourist council. The museum allocated the rest to promote the February induction ceremonies and other events in the hope this will increase attendance from 20,000 visitors last year to 30,000 this year, according to attraction representative Sheree Monroe.

Being in a remote location has affected the number of people the museum draws and the gift shop brings in minimal revenue, McCarthy said.

He hopes to change that with discussions between the museum and the Boston Red Sox to build a satellite museum at Fenway Park.

"We don't draw numbers in this location; if a museum opened in Fenway Park, there would standing room only because Ted is revered up here," McCarthy said from Boston. "We are after baseball fans, and the museum is in a golfing and fishing retirement community. I have to be a realist. This is what I have to do to keep the museum strong."

That doesn't necessarily mean moving the museum, just making it more lucrative.

McCarthy said he hopes to generate enough revenue from visitors and sales in a Boston-based museum to increase awareness and fund the one in Citrus County. McCarthy said he, Colabelli and his wife, Susan, who is the executive secretary, and a nine-member board of directors who oversee the museum are just trying to find a business plan that is profitable. McCarthy said that in the past two years he has been able to travel across the country promoting the museum with the help of the Colabellis, who run the museum while he travels - something that hadn't been done much by previous executive directors.

As a result, McCarthy said, the museum is running on a more effective business plan than before. He said he and the rest of the staff are developing or discussing several ideas to generate revenue:

Reduce the annual induction ceremony from three days to one day. Increase the number of dinner and silent auctions, targeting the Red Sox fans in the Northeast and the Fort Myers spring training camp area.

Apply for federal grants. Colabelli said the museum has hired a grant writer to help find funds for the museum and will know their options next week.

Find corporate sponsorships. McCarthy said he will attend NASCAR's Siemens 300 in New Hampshire this weekend to seek sponsors.

"Ted Williams only used a Sharpie pen when he signed autographs," McCarthy said. "Why not get them to do a sponsorship deal?"

Start museum-run youth baseball camps and host AAU tournaments, which they hope will increase awareness, and bring money to the museum and local community.

Get funds to hire a teacher or museum curator to educate youth about the history of baseball and bring in large groups of schoolchildren from around the region.

Eventually increase the \$1,000 academic scholarship program for local students from four awards to eight, to promote community awareness.

Even with all the financial hurdles the museum must overcome, McCarthy said he is committed to keeping the main museum in Citrus County. It is within these walls that the great baseball legends of Mickey Mantle, Willie Mays, Yogi Berra, Hank Aaron, Wade Boggs, Barry Bonds, Mark McGwire, Monte Irvin, Joe and Dom DiMaggio, Johnny Pesky, and Bobby Doerr have walked, not to mention George Bush Sr. Muhammad Ali, Steve Spurrier and Michael Bolton - Williams' favorite singer.

"Ted not only lived here, but this place was special to him," McCarthy said. "The museum has become hallowed ground. It would be a shame to lose it. We just need a little support to keep Ted's legacy going."

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