

GOING TO BAT FOR ENGLISH

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In the stands of Civic Stadium between third base and home plate before Friday's game, the Eugene Emeralds held an unofficial "Ask the Ems."

It was the meet-and-greet of two sets of students from the Downtown Languages teaching center - a class of youth and a couple of Ems players, none of whom call English their primary language.

Drafted from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, respectively, catcher Emmanuel Quiles and third baseman Edinson Rincon have been taking language and culture classes to help ease their transition into life in the states at Downtown Languages since June.

This is the third year the downtown center has offered private classes to Ems players.

Attending Friday's game and meeting the players came as a culminating celebration for the Pasos al Futuro class, a two-week course, offered in part by the Lane Education Service District Migrant Education Program, aimed at helping young, non-native-English speakers search for jobs and transition to college.

After their last class Thursday, some students submitted applications to the University of Oregon, some to Lane Community College and some to the university's High School Equivalency Program.

As a reward, the next day the class went to meet a couple of fellow Downtown Languages students with a bit of local celebrity status.

While other players warmed up on the field, Quiles and Rincon, wearing Ems uniforms, met their fellow language learners in Civic Stadium's stands.

Before a gathering of about 10 students and instructors, Quiles and Rincon had the spotlight, taking questions from some of their biggest fans.

Karina Mora, 15, a sophomore-to-be at Willamette High School, started learning English at 7 years old. One of the more fluent in the class, she hesitated at first and then bravely asked her question in perfect English.

"What's harder - hitting a home run or learning English?" she asked. Her question met with laughter from the Ems players and her classmates.

The ballplayers agreed, English is harder.

Students were encouraged to ask their questions in English, but after a while they fell into a more comfortable exchange in Spanish.

Where do the players live? the Pasos students asked. The Hilton hotel, Quiles and Rincon answered.

How do they get around town? On bikes they inherited from previous Spanish-speaking Ems players.

Is playing ball their dream job? It is.

The hardest part about playing for the Ems in Eugene? Missing their families, they said.

Mora said she was excited to meet the players. She had seen their pictures but had never seen them in person.

"I wanted to see what they really looked like," she said. "Pictures are so much different."

The Pasos students weren't the only ones excited to be there.

The exchange was good for the players, said Nancy Meyer, who instructs Quiles and Rincon and the Pasos class. Quiles and Rincon have wanted the chance to appear on KMTR's weekly feature, "Ask the Ems," but the language barrier has prevented it.

Kim Knowlen, director of Downtown Languages, said joining the Ems and their fans was a great opportunity to show the young people that their goals, even in another language, are not out of reach.

"We think the Ems players are just fabulous role models," she said. "How they've gone after their dreams is really inspiring."

DOWNTOWN LANGUAGES

What: Center that offers language and life skills classes and aims to build and strengthen multicultural connections in the community

Where: 1035 Willamette St.

For more information: Call 686-8483 or go to www.downtownlanguages.org

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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