

Stay Strong, Dream Big

An Interview with Anthony Rizzo, Founder, Anthony Rizzo Family Foundation

EDITORS' NOTE Anthony Rizzo was a sixth-round draft pick out of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, by the Boston Red Sox. He has spent 10 years playing Major League Baseball for the San Diego Padres, Chicago Cubs, and now New York Yankees. Rizzo is a three-time All-Star, four-time Gold Glove Recipient and a Platinum Glove Recipient, Silver Slugger and World Series Champion. In 2017, Rizzo was named as the Roberto Clemente Award recipient, an award given to the player who best exemplifies the game of baseball, sportsmanship, community involvement and the individual's contribution to the team. In 2012, he founded the Anthony Rizzo Family Foundation. The Foundation has donated more than 11 million dollars since its inception.

FOUNDATION BRIEF The Anthony Rizzo Family Foundation (rizzo44.com) is a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit organization founded by New York Yankees first baseman, Anthony Rizzo, who realized during his own battle with cancer that no matter how difficult fighting cancer was for him, it was even more difficult for his family. Rizzo believes that an individual does not battle cancer alone, but that the whole family battles it together. The mission of the Anthony Rizzo Family Foundation is to raise money for cancer research and to provide support to children and their families battling the disease. The Anthony Rizzo Family Foundation believes that every family deserves a fighting chance.

What was your vision for creating the Anthony Rizzo Family Foundation and how do you define its mission?

I remember sitting with my mom in the hospital room when I was undergoing treatment telling her that when I was better, we were going to give back and help families. I am really proud to say that we are doing that. We have a \$3.5 million endowment at Lurie Children's Hospital, which is the local Children's Hospital in Chicago, which became my home away from home. The endowment provides Child Life Specialists to help families through the emotional side of a cancer diagnosis. We also have the Hope 44 Fund which provides financial support directly to families. My family and I were lucky that when I was going through cancer, the Boston Red Sox took care of all of our medical bills; the families we help aren't so lucky. When a child is diagnosed, a parent has to stop working and the loss of income along with increased medical bills create this financial toxicity for families. Our hope is to help remove some of



Anthony Rizzo meets with Liam, a two-year-old battling cancer, during Yankees batting practice

the financial stress for families by paying everyday household expenses like mortgages, rent, car payments, gas, groceries, and childcare costs so families can just concentrate on being together.

To be able to give back and do this type of work is so much bigger than winning the World Series or doing anything on the baseball field, because my family has been through it and there are so many families that are also going through it. This is as real as it gets in life.

How did your own battle with cancer impact the way you approach the work of the Foundation?

Every day, I am thankful and I want to give back. I was lucky when I was diagnosed to be able to meet Jon Lester who beat cancer and was living his dream of pitching for the Red Sox. That gave me hope. He also gave me some great advice that I still live by. He talked to me about staying positive, and when I was feeling well to get out and live my life and not let fear overtake it. I now try to pass that message along to kids I meet, whether during hospital visits, at the field or with letters we send to kids. It's important to stay positive for yourself and for those around you, and to never give up.

All of my letters end with "Stay Strong, Dream Big!" and that's the message I want these kids to hear.



Anthony and Matthew looking at one of the signs in the Anthony Rizzo Family Foundation waiting room at Lurie Children's Hospital. "Stay Strong, Dream Big" is the motto Anthony lives by and tells every child he meets.

Will you provide an overview of the work of the Foundation in the fight against pediatric cancer?

The Foundation provides direct grants to families to pay everyday household expenses. We provide grants for summer camps so kids with cancer and their siblings have the opportunity to attend camp in a safe and comfortable environment. We have our Rizzo Series events where we rent out one-of-a-kind places for kids to come out and just have fun – amusement parks, Wrigley field, FAO Schwarz. We support research for Hodgkin's at Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center and have endowed Child Life Specialists at both Joe DiMaggio Children's Hospital and Lurie Children's.

We also provide more than 1,000 autographed items to other cancer nonprofits to help them raise funds and I work with Abby Suarez, our Executive Director, to write personalized letters to anyone who writes in about a child battling cancer. We also host meet and greets at the field where families can come in and watch batting practice – we get them tickets and I get to meet with them for a bit. Before COVID, my wife, Emily, and I were doing hospital visits every month which is what I am most excited to get back to. I miss meeting with the kids and that's what I am most passionate about.

At the end of treatment, I want the families we support to look back on treatment and not just remember all the needles and days in the hospital, but have some positive memories that make them smile. That is why we do what we do.

How did the Anthony Rizzo Family Foundation adapt the way it works to address the challenges caused by the pandemic?

We got off the ground helping right away. I was sitting at home and was struggling with how to help our families that were afraid, as well as the staff with whom we work so closely at the hospital and who have become my friends and were so exhausted.



Anthony Rizzo signs autographs for the kids, then asks each child he visits with to sign his jersey as well

We immediately started teaming up with local restaurants – who had helped us in the past with different fundraisers – and would order meals from them. We would deliver these meals to hospital staff who so badly needed a break. It was a win-win to help the hospital workers and help these restaurants during such a difficult time. The program blew up and, all of a sudden, we were delivering meals to 30 hospitals in six different states. We also purchased more than 25,000 masks that were donated to hospitals and created personal care packages for our families with PPE supplies they so desperately needed. These families were most at risk and didn't have the time, or want to risk the exposure, to wait in line for hand sanitizer and masks – we had to get it to them.

How critical are metrics to measure the impact of the Foundation's work?

We don't worry about metrics so much – we worry about talking to our families and making sure we are helping where they need it most. This is a Family Foundation and we want to know those whom we are helping. My mom and wife talk to our families regularly.

Last year, a lot of our families were feeling isolated as others got back to normal life after the pandemic, so we created the Rizzo Series where we would completely rent out family friendly places – an Amusement Park, Wrigley Field, FAO Schwarz – and invite families to come out and just have a good time. They didn't have to worry about any cost, they didn't have to worry about their child with a weakened immune system waiting in line (there were no lines), or extra precautions like wiping down equipment, etc. They could just come out and have a normal family night. Seeing them smile and these families together again meant more to me than anything.

How can people support the Rizzo Foundation and the work you are doing?

We are teaming up with the YES Network for an auction during the game on July 14. We are going to showcase some great items throughout the broadcast and have interviews with some of the families we support. People can then go online and bid on the one-of-a-kind auction items, memorabilia, and experiences. You can check out the items at www.rizzo44.com. You can also donate through our website.

What are your priorities for the Anthony Rizzo Family Foundation as you look to the future?

My family and I are excited to be here in New York. The Yankees have been incredibly welcoming to both me and the Foundation. They have gone above and beyond in helping us host families at the ballpark along with teaming up with us for our Broadcast Auction. I hope we can continue to grow the Foundation here in New York and that Yankee fans embrace the work we are doing. I am lucky enough to have this incredible platform and it's my responsibility and pleasure to use it to give back. ●



The Rizzo Family (left to right): Laurie, John, Anthony, Emily, Vincent (child), Sarah, Aria (child), John kicking off the 10th Annual Walk-Off for Cancer