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SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. -- On the surface, Joe Garagiola Sr. leads the life of many other retired athletes in the Valley of the Sun.

The former Cubs catcher and former host of the "Today" show plays golf. He speaks at banquets. He likes the early dinner at the Quilted Bear on North Scottsdale Road. Garagiola turned 80 on Feb. 12.

Unlike other retired athletes, Garagiola got up the next morning and drove 35 miles south to the St. Peter Indian Mission School on the Gila River Reservation in Bapchule, Ariz. He has done this a few times a week for the last 13 years. On this unique morning, the children of the Pima and Maricopa tribes were throwing a birthday party for the man they call "Awesome Fox."

Garagiola has led the way for the impoverished reservation to obtain new bathrooms, a basketball court and a baseball field. He is raising money to build a new library. The school already has a copy of Garagiola's 1960 best seller, "Baseball Is a Funny Game."

A spiritual leader gave Garagiola the name "Awesome Fox" because his work had been awesome and he's sorta foxy in working the angles -- after all, he played in Chicago.

"I still belong to the Cubs, by the way," Garagiola said during a conversation on his birthday at the Hotel Valley Ho. "I'm still on their voluntary retirement list. I kid Cubs president Andy MacPhail, 'That's part of your problem.'"

The old catcher is knee deep in one of the most awesome chapters of his life.

"I can't tell you what keeps me going down there," Garagiola said. "When I first went to the mission, I saw 225 kids -- they had nothing. Their basketball uniforms were T-shirts and shorts. When the boys took them off, the girls had to wear the same sweaty uniforms. It was horrible. The buildings were infested with termites. Their baseball field was overrun with weeds. The bathrooms were from 1933. There's 97 boys, and there were two urinals -- and one was broken. The nuns are so good to these kids, but they all needed help."

A majority of the children, ages 5-14, live in homes without air-conditioning, heat or beds.

Garagiola heard about the mission in January 1993, after school principal Sister Martha spoke at a men's club breakfast at Our Lady of Perpetual Help in

Scottsdale. She wowed the men with her sports acumen. Sister Martha was born in Green Bay, Wis., and her uncles Carl and Martin Zoll were original Packers.

Garagiola attends Our Lady of Perpetual Help, but he was out of town for her appearance. Arizona Cardinals owner Bill Bidwill was in attendance. He told Garagiola about Sister Martha. Bidwill already had been assisting the mission.

"The Arizona sports community has been terrific since we met Joe and Mr. Bidwill," Sister Martha said in a separate interview.

When Garagiola met Sister Martha, he asked for her priority.

"I thought she was going to say a computer room or something," Garagiola recalled. "But she said, 'A basketball court.' It would tie the kids together since it would be in the middle of the school, shaped like a horseshoe. And it would get rid of mud kids bring into the classroom. But most important, kids would come after school to play. They would get attention they weren't getting at home. That impressed me."

The fox went to work. He networked with former NBA player Jim Fox and Scottsdale-area builder Greg Hancock to get the children a new paved court. "That was the start," Garagiola said.

Hancock Communities then built a new garage for the reservation, and the school's seven nuns got a new convent with a separate air-conditioned chapel.

"Joe is a blessing to us," Sister Martha said. "Joe makes good things happen all the time. Our children who are in school now have never known a time where they didn't know Joe. They don't have a clue that Joe is famous. They just know him as their friend Joe."

Garagiola once gave a speech at the Scottsdale Bible School. Two men approached Garagiola after his talk. They owned a local sporting-goods store and asked Garagiola to speak at a convention.

"I don't come cheap," Garagiola said. "So I bartered with them. I said I needed basketball uniforms for the boys and the girls. Not just one set -- two sets for each. Same thing for softball. Football. And I went down the line. And you should have seen the kids when I brought the uniforms down."

Garagiola paused and smiled.

"I changed the name of the mission," he continued. "Now I call it 'Our Lady of Quicksand.' Once you're in, you can't get out. Those sporting-goods guys are now down there all the time."

Yankees pitcher and Scottsdale resident Randy Johnson gives new Nike shoes to the kids on the reservation. Johnson personally hands out the shoes to make sure they fit.

"Those kids are so impressed when he comes to the res," Garagiola said.

"Diamondbacks outfielder Luis Gonzalez has been a great help. Connie Hawkins comes down from the Phoenix Suns."

Just as the sports projects were winding down, Garagiola received a call from Sister Martha. She explained the reverse on the school's van blew out. Garagiola asked if anyone got hurt. Garagiola recalled, "She said, 'No, we're still using it.' She said they made wide turns and didn't back up."

Garagiola called on a Scottsdale automobile dealer for a van and a station wagon. Later, country singer Garth Brooks' Teammates for Kids Foundation donated a bus.

"The biggest problem is diabetes," Garagiola said. "A lot of people think it's alcohol. But it's diabetes, obesity, sexual molestation, then alcohol. We get federally funded breakfasts and lunches. Eighty-nine percent of our people are below the poverty level. Before breakfast or after lunch, they have to walk or run around the track to keep in some kind of shape."

Garagiola once noticed 15 kids having difficulty breathing. The reservation is in a swirling dust bowl. He had grass installed. The children now play soccer, softball and baseball on the new grass. Garagiola is most proud of the lighted baseball field. The Bapchule Chamber of Commerce wanted to install a plaque at the field in Garagiola's honor. He declined.

"My goal is to instill self-esteem," Garagiola said. "I asked for a flagpole so we can fly the American flag, the state of Arizona flag and the Gila River flag."

Garagiola even reeled in James Bradley, the author of *Flags of Our Fathers*, the book about the planting of the American flag at Iwo Jima. Bradley spoke at St. Peter.

"One of the fellas who planted the flag was Ira Hayes, a Pima Indian from Sacaton, Ariz.," Garagiola said. "It bothered me that in 1964's 'Ballad of Ira Hayes' Johnny Cash would sing about Ira Hayes, the drunken Pima who went to war. It perpetuated the myth that all Indians are drunks."

Hayes died in January 1955 after freezing to death in an irrigation ditch in rural Arizona. He was 33.

"Ira was a decent kid," Garagiola said. "Today they would have said he had 'post-war trauma.' Bradley came down. It was very moving."

Garagiola collected newspaper stories, pictures and tributes and assembled an "Ira Hayes Wall" at the school. He said, "I have one picture where they're all planting the flag and one of them is dressed in Indian clothing and loins. He is very prominent. He is a genuine hero."

So is the Awesome Fox.