

# THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

## Everyday Eddie puts his fame to good use

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You can't always predict who will end up with fame and fortune.

Eddie Guardado didn't appear especially blessed when he was born in 1970, one of 10 siblings in Stockton where his father had come from Mexico to work the fields.

But Eddie admits, "I could always throw the ball."

And he did: As a relief pitcher for the Minnesota Twins, Seattle Mariners, Cincinnati Reds and Texas Rangers. He was just 22 when

he hit the big leagues and the good life.

But if celebrity is an asset, should you cash it in for a cause?

Eddie and his wife Lisa think so. Their cause is helping children with autism and his Major League connections give them a good chunk of celebrity capital to spend on its behalf.

"Nobody wants to hear about my story," Lisa explains. "I'm not the draw; he's the draw."

Eddie's good fortune gives them the resources and his celebrity gives them the edge. This Tustin couple leverages both for all they're worth.

Eddie, a standout in the record books, can throw with great accuracy.

But as a toddler his third child, Ava, 6, had trouble hitting her milestones.

Her autism story is not unlike many others. She wasn't walking, making eye contact, or waving bye-bye. But she was very particular about lining up her Dora the Explorer books.

"She was just 2 years old," Lisa recalls, "but she did have her routines."

Then came what Lisa calls her "ologist" moment. That would be the visits to the audiologist, neurologist, pathologist and other specialists.

Eddie flew in from Cincinnati for that defining meeting and diagnosis in 2007.

"It was devastating. Lisa broke down," he recalls. "I said we have to stay strong. If we don't, we're not helping Ava one bit."

Helping Ava was, of course, the first priority.

And so began the therapies: speech, occupational, behavioral, handwriting. Today Ava is mainstreamed at a private school she attends with a full-time aide.

She still has significant issues, particularly speech, but she comprehends instructions and writes her name and numbers. Her parents credit early intervention.

"If we didn't have her team," Eddie says, "Ava wouldn't be this far."

Autism humbles all parents.

When Ava was 3, and picked Target to throw a tantrum, Lisa eventually sat on the ground next to her.

"I let her have her moment ... People looked at me like: Control your kid ... I thought: You have no idea."

The Guardados couldn't help but think about other families with similar needs but less good fortune. They had always felt a responsibility to support good causes, but it's different when a cause becomes personal.

"Nothing was ever true to my heart," Lisa says. "I wasn't driven."

Now she is.

In 2008 they established the Eddie Guardado Foundation, hoping to help families get the therapies and treatments for autism they couldn't otherwise afford. In 2011, the foundation merged with Tarzana-based ACT Today! (Autism Care and Treatment Today) which has a similar purpose.

As board members, they noticed many families were asking for iPads. Lisa counted the applications and said: We'll just do this.

So the Guardado Foundation donated \$27,000 to buy iPads for other families.

Eddie says they deliberately aren't focused on finding a cure for autism:

"These kids can't wait 10 years for the research. We have to use what works now ... the earlier the better."

As a celebrity, he's using what works.

Eddie explains that when you get to the big leagues and start to make a bit of money — and you see what the established players do — you begin to realize the potential of your success.

"I was 22 years old and I thought that maybe someday we could help out people. It's a good feeling, but it's also the right thing to do ... But when it (a cause) hits home ... you think about it a lot more."

Now the Guardados work it, raising awareness and fundraising for their foundation by asking for a little help from their friends.

They are organizing a Stars & Strikes celebrity bowling tournament Jan. 29. It will include baseball heavy hitters Garret Anderson, Adrian Beltre, Eric Chavez, Torii Hunter, Vernon Wells and Michael Young, among others.

"They come because they are baseball friends," Eddie says.

Lisa points out: "Then they know Eddie will come to their event."

It's like selling candy bars for your child's team at the office, but on a higher level. If you're an ordinary

person, Eddie says, it's a lot harder to get the big sponsors, much less the right phone numbers in order to invite the big names.

"The people we ask are good ball players and good human beings."

It helps to know whom you're asking.

"What kind of person are they? They could be well known, but at your bowling event they could be an idiot."

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To support their cause, the Guardados are willing to barter some of their privacy: making the rounds of talk shows and allowing media like me into their home.

"You have to take advantage," Lisa says. "You have to have some kind of hook or an angle."

They also don't feel a need to shelter their daughter, an impish girl with her daddy's smile.

"I want everyone to see Ava. She is who she is. It's not a big secret," Lisa says.

In a way, you could say the Guardados are shameless about getting what they want.

Eddie says simply: "We want to put hope into people's hearts."

He retired as a player in 2009, and says his job now is driving car pools. His kids just think of him as Dad. But in baseball circles, as an All-Star, Guardado's durable arm earned him a nickname: "Everyday Eddie."

Everyday? Maybe.

Ordinary? Hardly.

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