



## **Passion and Determination Leads to Success in First International Equipment Drive** **By Cory Francer**

As he approached the date of his bar mitzvah, in addition to the hours of studying, practicing his Torah portion, and balancing the every day demands of seventh grade, Matthew Furst wanted to find a way to help underprivileged kids play baseball and softball.

Part of the Jewish tradition of the bar and bat mitzvah, in addition to a 13-year-old ceremoniously entering adulthood, is the completion of a mitzvah project, in which a young person gives back to his or her community in a meaningful way. While Matthew could have taken the easy route by starting a fundraiser to buy baseball and softball equipment for kids in need, he opted to challenge himself by starting an equipment drive for members of his community to donate their lightly used equipment.

The challenge for Matthew in embarking on such a project is that he lives in London, where baseball pales in comparison to sports like soccer, rugby and cricket, in terms of popularity. But not wanting to take the easy way out, Matthew opted to make the most of his London youth baseball community, which despite not being the city's most popular sport, has brought together a close knit collection of baseball and softball loving families.

"Money is great to buy equipment – but we wanted to get something in the flesh," Matthew says. "That way you get to see the smile on [kids'] faces."

Together with his father Warren and mother Karen, Matthew explains that he contacted Pitch in for Baseball after discovering its website in a search for baseball and softball-related charities to reach out to. Though the Furst family knew it would be challenging to arrange an international collection drive for the Pennsylvania-based nonprofit, working with Pitch in for Baseball was the best avenue toward donating actual equipment to kids lacking the resources to play the game.

So, the Fursts reached out to the Pitch in for Baseball staff to see if conducting such an initiative would be feasible. Matthew recalls talking with the organization's staff members on the phone and learning that his would be the first overseas collection, but that the staff was on board with helping him make this a reality.

### **The Collection Begins**

The Fursts are originally from New York and Matthew was born in New York City and lived there until he was two-years-old, at which point the family moved to London. Despite the drastic relocation, the family has always maintained its love for baseball and Matthew says he watches as much baseball as he can, rooting on his hometown Yankees, even from such a long distance.

Karen Furst explains that despite the game's general lack of popularity in the U.K., there is a strong community of about 400 families in London that have maintained a thriving youth program, in which Matthew has been able to grow up playing baseball. She says that when Matthew was first in contact with Pitch in for Baseball, she knew the London baseball community would come together to donate equipment – the only question she had was as to how Matthew could get it all shipped across the Atlantic Ocean to Pennsylvania.

"We knew we could get the equipment," Karen Furst says. "The issue was how get it from London to Philadelphia. We did have friends traveling and were able to get it back to the U.S., but no one had ever done a drive overseas."

To help Matthew get started on the project, Pitch in For Baseball shipped a large banner with its logo prominently displayed to the Fursts in London. Then during the first weekend in May, Matthew and Warren set up a station at the baseball field Matthew's program plays at with the banner as a backdrop. Matthew explains he had also created brochures to pass out that explained Pitch in for Baseball's mission and the goal for his project. Additionally, since Warren is one of the commissioners of the program, he was able to send emails out to all of the parents to let them know about the collection.

At first, Matthew explains, the collecting was slow, and he and his dad did not receive much equipment on the Saturday they spent out at the field. However, they did get the word out about the project on that Saturday and when they returned to the field on Sunday for another day of collecting, the equipment came pouring in.

By the end of that weekend, Matthew proudly states he was able to collect 34 bats, five pairs of shin guards, eight batting helmets, four chest protectors, three catcher's helmets, 19 baseballs, five softballs, 36 pairs of batting gloves and a whopping 78 fielding gloves.

"I think families mostly buy equipment from the states and as kids grow they can no longer use it," Matthew says. "A lot of people were happy to put it toward something."

### **Back Across the Pond**

Though the Fursts were initially concerned about how they would ship all of the equipment from London to the United States, in actuality, the process ended up going quite smoothly. Because of their roots in New York, the family does travel back to the U.S. on occasion, and as it turned out, Warren Furst had planned a trip back to New York City with a friend at the conclusion of the equipment drive.

So, with an assortment of boxes of equipment and duffel bags filled with uniforms, Warren Furst and a friend transported everything across the Atlantic to New York. Then, once in New York, it was much easier to ship everything directly to Pitch in for Baseball in Pennsylvania.

While Matthew explains he was initially disheartened by the slow start to his collection, he was thrilled with the way the community rallied around his cause on the second day of the drive. It was a bit of a roller coaster of a weekend he explains, as he went from worrying about not collecting enough equipment to possibly having to too much to send back.

"I was really surprised at first," he says. "I was kind of shocked and disappointed, but then we got a lot more and were almost panicking because we got too much. It felt really good to see how the baseball community chipped in."

### **A Rewarding Experience**

Throughout the entire experience, Matthew explains that Pitch in for Baseball provided great communication and guidance to help him with his collection drive. And when he received a photo of all of the gear that he helped to donate being unpacked in the Pitch in for Baseball warehouse, he was overjoyed to see his efforts become a reality.

"I felt really good about how much we collected, especially for it being our first drive," Matthew says. "I'm proud of myself for how I was able to get the equipment, organize the drive and share my passion for baseball and share it around the world."

In January, Matthew will be surrounded by his friends and family in his synagogue as he celebrates his bar mitzvah, which was the impetus for his involvement with Pitch in for Baseball. He explains that he is excited to get to share his experiences in completing a mitzvah project that meant so much to him personally.

With his passion for the sport and desire to help others, Matthew's work with Pitch in for Baseball is a clear example of how determination can exceed any obstacle presented by distance. And while his goal was to help kids in need play the game he loves so much, Matthew explains that completing the first international equipment drive for Pitch in for Baseball was an incredibly rewarding experience.

"When people come up and donate equipment, they thank you for what you're doing," Matthew says. "It was awesome to see that people appreciated what we were doing and that their equipment was going somewhere."