NORMAN MAILER, BASEBALL MAN

PHILLIP SIPIORA JR.

IN FEBRUARY OF 2004 MY PARENTS HAD A RECEPTION AT our house for Norman Mailer, who was speaking at the University of South Florida. I had never met Mr. Mailer before the party, but felt that I knew a little about him since my Dad talked about him all the time. I was pretty excited that Norman Mailer would be at my house. My eighth-grade English teacher thought it was a big deal when I told him about it.

I was thirteen years old at the time and most of my life was baseball. I was a pitcher and played on two teams, two seasons a year for a total of nearly 100 games a year. The day of the party our team won and I had pitched.

It was about 9:00 o'clock when my coach dropped me off at home. I was still sweaty in my uniform. The house was crowded, about forty people, and everyone was standing around Mr. Mailer, who was sitting on our couch talking to a guest. When my Dad saw me, he called me over and took me up to meet Mr. Mailer. I had never met someone of his stature before and I was pretty nervous. I was also embarrassed that I had my uniform on, but my Dad insisted that Mr. Mailer wouldn't care. "Just don't say anything bad about the Red Sox," he warned me. "Mr. Mailer lives in Massachusetts." (My family has been rabid Chicago White Sox fans for generations.)

Mr. Mailer and I shook hands. I didn't know what to say but it didn't make any difference. Mr. Mailer looked carefully at my uniform and said that he had been a Brooklyn Dodgers fan growing up. He never liked the Yankees, he said, so we hit it off with something important in common. Mr. Mailer asked me what I liked about baseball, what position I played, and how the game went. I was amazed that someone at his level would direct all of his attention to a kid, especially one in a dirty, smelly uniform. Mr. Mailer then said to me, "A picture would be good." He stood up and put his arm around me for two pictures, which I have and cherish very much. I thought that I

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was done, but then Mr. Mailer asked me, "Do you have a baseball?" I ran to get one. Mr. Mailer signed it: "To Phillip, I'm a Red Sox fan, Cheers, Norman Mailer." Then Mr. Mailer said something I will never forget: "Phillip, I have never signed a baseball before. You now have the only one."

Those precious minutes with Norman Mailer will stay with me the rest of my life.

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I thought of my meeting with Mr. Mailer when I went with my Dad to New York for the Carnegie Hall Memorial to Mr. Mailer in April. As I listened to Mr. Mailer's family and friends tell many touching stories of his kindnesses and ability to relate so personally to so many people, I thought of how he related to a kid in a grubby uniform that night in Tampa. And how he made that kid feel very important. Mr. Mailer, I will never forget you.