

Hitting a Home Run: Chatting with Robert Weissman, recipient of IBM Community Grants

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The opportunity to contribute to the local community is always exciting, especially when the effort is also supported by IBM. In 2016, over 50 members of our community have received [IBM Community Grants](#). The IBM Community Grants program allocates funds to eligible community organizations and schools where IBM employees and retirees actively volunteer. These grants are available to regular employees and retirees, featuring individual and team opportunities ranging from \$500 to \$2,000 in cash. These funds can make a real difference for the receiving organization and subsequently improve the lives of the people in the community.

The recipients this year have made great impact on their communities, and this month we are featuring an interview @Weissman, Robert, who works with the Boston Renegades, the only baseball team for the blind and visually impaired in New England.

If you believe that your community organization or school where you have volunteered consistently for could benefit from these grants, please do not hesitate to speak with our grants administrator @Quaid, Carol or find out more about how to apply w3 [IBM Community Grants](#). **Although the program has closed for 2016, you can begin preparing to apply for a grant when the program reopens in the Spring.**

Robert Weissman



Rob Weissman is a Product Line Manager for Bluemix Business. Originally, Rob worked at Rational, which IBM acquired in 2003, and he has been an IBMer ever since. Outside of work, Rob is heavily involved with the Boston Renegades, where he coaches, fundraises and manages the team. Through his leadership skills and team spirit, he has been making positive contributions to the team since 2003 and he has been awarded eleven IBM Community Grants totaling \$18,500 for his work. Rob is also among the most distinguished of IBM volunteers, in 2014 he was awarded the President's Lifetime Achievement Award based on volunteering 4,000 hours for the Boston Renegades.

Interview with Robert Weissman

The Renegades are a unique group, what sparked your interest to get involved with the group?

In college, I was friends with many people with disabilities. We bonded over common things like our love for sports and eventually, we ended up playing together. Sometimes we played football and quadriplegics would "catch the ball" and I would be the QB. I modified a lot of games this way, which was both fun and very rewarding. We spent a lot of time playing these sports and one of my friends was pretty excited about baseball, so he tried to get me to modify it like I did with football. Years later, the same friend contacted me because there now was a group that wanted to get involved in baseball.

That's how I joined The Boston Renegades in 2003-- they invited me to coach the team. You know, there is no team sport that blind or visually impaired adults can play in New England. They can sail or play golf but if you want that team dynamic, there is nothing other than us. I have been doing it since 2003 and it has become one of the greatest passions in my life. Over the years, we've build an organization that brought a lot of people together and many of my friends joined it. At the end of the day, we're just a bunch of guys and girls but we all bonded through The Renegades; we did something together, and at the same time we've built an incredibly unique atmosphere. For me, this is not about going somewhere and punching in a card and saying "I did my community service." It's intertwined with my life.



It seems that the volunteering you've been doing with The Renegades had significant positive impact on you and the rest of the team. Can you tell me more about the team and the organization that runs it?

We are the only blind and visually impaired baseball team in New England. The team is composed of about 15 active players and 18 active volunteers, though this number fluctuates. The Renegades fall under the umbrella of the Association of Blind Citizens, which is the parent organization



that does the accounting, fundraising, etc. I started off doing the coaching with The Renegades, and so I am on the field most of the time. As the 13 years went by I've also taken on responsibility for more of the administrative work from the Association of Blind Citizens, so it's truly a team effort.

Sounds like a lot of work, you must be pretty busy between the coaching and fundraising. How does the team support itself?

We get some contribution from employees to the Association of Blind Citizens through the Employee Charitable Contributions Campaign ([ECCC](#)) and IBM has been a big supporter of our efforts with eleven IBM Community grants contributing \$18,500 toward the cost of the team's specialized equipment. In addition to that, athletes also have fundraising goals that they strive to meet. Of course, no one in The Renegades gets paid, so all of our fundraising goes to the team travel expenses. We have to travel to go to the games and it tends to add up-- just this year we traveled to New York, Philadelphia, Iowa and we may be going to Chicago, New Jersey and Florida next.

Obviously, the game had to be modified somehow to make it more accessible to the players. What changes did you make to the game?

Back in the 1970s the original modifications were made by the "[Telecom Pioneers](#)", who created a mechanism in the ball that makes a beeping sound, so that the blind and visually impaired can play the game. The ball makes one specific sound and the bases makes a different noise, which allows the players to know where to run. We still order the baseballs from Telecomm Pioneers, and they sometimes come from Denver to improve the balls using parts from old payphones.



In addition to using modified baseballs, the pitcher and the catcher are on the same team as the hitter, which

simplifies things a little. We work together as a team to hit the ball. On defense the fielders have to pick up the ball and show possession, but they don't have to throw it. Offense is the sexy, fun part, but defense is where things get truly challenging. Defense is what really separates the best teams.

Has the effort been paying off? How are you doing in the league?

We just had the most successful year ever. Before this year, the highest we finished in the world's series was 5th and this year we finished 2nd since we lost the championship game. It was the dream. A very special moment. It was a total thrill for everyone on the team, a culmination of all the effort over the years. Making it to the championships was especially powerful because we had many troubles beforehand. For example, one of our main players wasn't able to play because we had a major collision right before the game. I know we would have played better if he had been there.

From a competitive standpoint, this year was it. The game that qualified us for the semi-final game was phenomenal. We were missing a player who was injured and we still came from behind and won in extra innings. The joy of knowing we made it to the championship game was remarkable, the positive energy was almost palpable.

Wow, that sounds like a monumental moment in the history of the team. Congratulations! Aside from this victory though, what were some of your favorite moments working with the program?

My involvement with the Renegades has always been very rewarding on a personal level. This happens over and over again: I meet someone who has never heard about the sport and maybe sports



were a big part of their life and then they get there and hit the ball and they realize that “holy crap, I can do this, I can play this game”. That part never gets old. I just love seeing guys and girls achieve something that they thought they could never do. I know how important sports are to me, so seeing them participate and succeed is very gratifying.

As for the game, we define winning differently for everyone. Sometimes people come and they have other issues than the loss of vision. For example, there is a rare disease called Leber optic neuropathy, and we have four guys on the team with this disease and they learn from each other. They learn how to cope and how to move around. One of them moved here recently and was trying to figure out how to get around and how to do his homework. He asked a teammate that just graduated from Harvard for advice, and that enabled him to succeed in school. The Renegades are more than just a team on the field, we support and help each other off the field too.

N.B. *If any of our readers that love baseball as much as Rob would like to get involved, the team is always looking for extra help. Anyone willing to volunteer or play or donate is always welcome. Check out the [Renegade’s web page](#) (designed by IBMers) for more information.*