

RV and Cross-Country Journey Aside, Jeff Idelson is not Your Typical Retiree



Milo Stewart Jr./National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum

That the induction of Mariano Rivera would close out his 25-year career at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum was not lost on Jeff Idelson when he announced his retirement as the Hall's president in May.

"There's some great symmetry in that you have two closers, Mariano and Lee Smith, as I close out my career at the Hall of Fame," said the 55-year-old Idelson, who joined the Hall of Fame as its Director of Public Relations and Promotions in 1994 and was named President on April 15, 2008.

A native of West Newton, Mass., Idelson's career in baseball actually began as a vendor at Boston's Fenway Park for five summers in the early 1980s. From there, he had stints with the Red Sox as an assistant in the public relations department (1986-88) and radio producer for Sox home games (1987-88), as well as a five-year run as the PR chief for the Yankees under George Steinbrenner (1989-93).

When Idelson's obligations at the Hall of Fame end with the 2019 Induction Weekend (July 20-21), Cooperstown will literally be in his

rear-view mirror as he makes his way across iconic Route 66 in a customized RV. But, unlike most retirees on similar cross-country treks, Idelson's journey is part of his next professional venture—"Grassroots Baseball"—and is supported by both corporate and individual sponsors.

"My reasons for retiring from the position at the Hall of Fame were pretty simple," Idelson said. "I've had the great opportunity to promote the major-league game for eight years and to promote the Hall of Famers and their tie to history for the last 25 years. I

wanted to go back and promote, call greater attention to and give back to the grassroots game, the amateur game."

Partnering with acclaimed baseball photographer Jean Fruth, Idelson's '19 tour, "Grassroots Baseball: Route 66," aims to celebrate and promote the amateur game in big cities and small towns. The six-month, 2,500-mile tour began on May 1 on Chicago's Lake Shore Drive and is expected to end in October in Santa Monica, Calif.

"As I had the opportunity to work with Jean for three-plus years when she was with the Hall of Fame as our traveling photographer, I got to witness firsthand how much she enjoyed and appreciated the amateur game," Idelson said. "We worked on a few projects together to promote the amateur game, such as the 'Little League World Series,' 'Baseball Japan' and 'Baseball Cuba,' so the decision for her and me to develop this new venture was the impetus for my making the move. I wanted to give back at the amateur level."

At several of the estimated 100 stops along the way, former major-league players as well as several Hall of Famers—including Johnny Bench, George Brett, Goose Gossage, Trevor Hoffman, Ozzie Smith and Jim Thome—will interact with boys and girls, many of whom are actually being introduced to the game.

"There's nothing quite like going into a community and bringing kids a new Rawlings baseball glove or a new baseball and for them to learn from the Hall of Famers about the life lessons that baseball teaches," Idelson said. "For these Hall of Fame legends to be able to say 'Look, I started out just like you. If (the game) is of an interest to you, if it's a passion for you, you can make this a career, too. I'm no different than any of you.' That's a powerful message."

The tour will be chronicled by Fruth for her second book, *Grassroots Baseball: Route 66*. Her first book, *Grassroots Baseball: Where Legends Begin*, included more than 250 images of baseball players, parents and fans from around the world.

Plans for future tours, which will include foreign countries where baseball is played, are already in the



Hall of Famer Goose Gossage visits kids from the Union League Boys and Girls Club of Chicago.

works and Idelson is comfortable that the Hall of Fame and Museum will be in good hands with incoming President Tim Mead.

"Tim and I have known each other for 30 years and I've always held him in the highest esteem," Idelson said of Mead, who, in 2019, began his 40th season with the Los Angeles Angels and 22nd as Vice President

of Communications. "He's someone with great credibility and is part of the landscape and fabric of MLB. To have someone of his stature in Cooperstown to work with our staff to take the Hall of Fame to the next level is a win for our board and the staff here in Cooperstown. And for baseball fans everywhere."

—Rick Cerrone

Heading west on Route 66 for Santa Monica, California, Idelson and photographer Jean Fruth make a stop in Pontiac, Illinois. Their trip will continue until October.



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