Baseball Teams Honor West Victims, First Responders

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ARLINGTON, Texas (AP) — For a few hours Saturday, the beleaguered residents of West could put aside this spring's deadly fertilizer plant explosion and instead focus on which baseball team they liked better — the Texas Rangers or Houston Astros.

Fans give a standing ovation as West, Texas, first responders stand on the field before a baseball game between the Houston Astros and Texas Rangers on Saturday, July 6, 2013, in Arlington, Texas. The Texas Rangers are hosting a night to honor residents and first responders from the town devastated by a fertilizer plant explosion. **(AP Photo/Tony Gutierrez)**

The Rangers invited the entire North Texas community to its game Saturday night against Houston, and before the first pitch, held a 30-minute ceremony honoring the 15 people who were killed in the April 17 blast, including 10 first responders.

Kathy Matus, whose brother was among the first responders killed in the blast, said she couldn't thank the Rangers enough for helping the town with healing process.

"It's good for the community to get back some semblance of normalcy," said Matus as she fought back tears. "The fact that everyone's together and (the Rangers) are showing their support and appreciating what we went through."

The explosion, which also injured 200, leveled the West Fertilizer Co. plant and destroyed or damaged homes, schools and businesses for blocks around. Efforts to rebuild are still in their early stages, and many whose homes were affected have had to leave town. So for some, Saturday's game was a chance for some to reconnect and to enjoy a night at the ballpark with friends.

"It helps to know that people here (at the game) care about West people," said Donna Sepeda who came to the game with her family. She added that the game is

just an escape from dealing with repairs to their damaged house.

West's mayor, Tommy Muska, said the town greatly appreciated what the team had done for it, and even called the game a part of the emotional healing process.

"This is a huge gift ... and it's something our citizens need," Muska said. "To have them come out and smile, and have some fun, it's important for their mental psyche."

During the pregame ceremony, the town was presented with $140,000 in donations from Major League Baseball, its Players Association and the Texas Rangers' foundation for the town's recovery efforts.

It "shows the humanity that is out there," Muska said.

Rangers player Lance Berkman, who grew up in Houston, donated a fire truck to West's volunteer fire department, which lost many of its vehicles in the explosion.

Former Ranger and West-born Scott Podsednik said he returned to his hometown to survey the damage.

"When something like this hits your hometown, and it hits that close to home, it brings on a whole new meaning," Podsendnik said.

But the mayor said the town would recover and be a much stronger for it.

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