

ABD,

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to AAA and struck out five batters in his first two innings of work. He thought he was on his way to the majors but a setback began to put his baseball career in a tailspin.

"They tried to change my delivery a little bit and my mechanics and I ended up getting hurt," said Bibens-Dirkx, who had shoulder surgery in 2007.

"The next year I struggled, just mentally, physically, it wasn't all there."

Bibens-Dirkx was then released by the Mariners before the 2009 season.

In July of 2009, Bibens-Dirkx got another chance with the Chicago Cubs. He started with the Class A Peoria Chiefs, moved up to AA to start the following season as was back in AAA by the summer.

Bibens-Dirkx spent the rest of the 2010 and 2011 seasons primarily with the Iowa

Cubs before signing with the Washington Nationals, who invited him to spring training in 2012. But Bibens-Dirkx didn't make the big league roster, instead being assigned to the AAA Syracuse Chiefs. He was then demoted to AA before being released.

Bibens-Dirkx spent the rest of 2012 with the Colorado Rockies organization before signing with the Toronto Blue Jays in 2013. He pitched mainly in AAA but couldn't make the next step.

"There were a couple of times when I thought I probably should've been given the opportunity," Bibens-Dirkx said. "There were times that opportunities were probably there and I just wasn't pitching well and didn't deserve it."

Bibens-Dirkx then found himself out of the minors and in an independent league playing with the Lancaster Barnstormers in Pennsylvania.

"It's guys who don't necessarily want to go get a real job yet," Bibens-Dirkx said of independent baseball. "It's not the end of all baseball but it's

definitely leaning towards that. It's not necessarily the easiest thing to get out of. A team really has to take a chance on you or is in need of something that you can provide. There are so many guys in the minor league system already."

Thankfully for Bibens-Dirkx, the Rangers were looking for a pitcher with experience to send to AAA and he had spent a lot of time there.

Bibens-Dirkx signed with Texas in June of 2016 and reported to the Round Rock Express. Bibens-Dirkx remained in Round Rock for the rest of 2016 and started the 2017 season there as well before finally getting the call he had waited so long for.

"I started practicing my signature when I was seven years old," Bibens-Dirkx said. "I had an idea of what I wanted to do. You can't really see that far in the future at seven years old but that's just something (playing in the major leagues) I wanted to do and I wanted to work as hard as I could to achieve that."

The hard work included spending his offseasons pitching in Venezuela.

"Going down to Venezuela every offseason has really helped me because I'm playing against a lot of these big league guys down there," Bibens-Dirkx said. "I've been getting big league hitters out, which I think has finally opened people's eyes."

Bibens-Dirkx got the call to the majors at 7:30 a.m. on May 6 and flew to Seattle, where the Rangers were in the middle of a three-game series with the Mariners. He was activated on May 7.

"My phone flooded with texts from guys on the (Round Rock) team," Bibens-Dirkx said. "A couple guys said, 'No matter what happens to me, this makes my year, you getting an opportunity.' That meant a lot."

Bibens-Dirkx went to the Rangers as a long relief pitcher, someone who could eat innings when the starter struggled. But on May 31 Bibens-Dirkx was tasked with starting himself.

Against the Tampa Bay Rays, Bibens-Dirkx's goal was to pitch at least five innings. He made it four and two-thirds but would get a second start against an organization that had released him five years earlier — Washington Nationals.

"I want to prove people wrong and say you should have given me a chance," Bibens-Dirkx said. "Going into games against teams you played for that didn't give you an opportunity, there's always that extra little chip that you want to prove that they definitely made a mistake."

Going head-to-head with two-time Cy Young Award winner Max Scherzer and



Submitted
Keizer City Councilor Roland Herrera visited with Austin Bibens-Dirkx in Texas after the Rangers game on Wednesday, June 21.

facing a lineup that included 2015 National League Most Valuable Player Bryce Harper and 2016 Silver Slugger Daniel Murphy, Bibens-Dirkx allowed just three hits and one run, a solo home run to the first hitter of the game, over seven innings to earn the win on June 11.

"That might be probably one of the most memorable outings that I might ever have in my career," said Bibens-Dirkx, who retired 19 Nationals in a row. "I just kept the ball down with making quality pitches and if you do that in any league, you can get guys out."

Playing at a National League ballpark, Bibens-Dirkx also got to hit for the first time, going 0-for-2 with two strikeouts against Scherzer.

"I fouled off a couple pitches," Bibens-Dirkx said. "The ball comes in pretty quickly."

After allowing five runs in a no-decision against the Blue Jays in his next start, Bibens-Dirkx bounced back to shut down another of the best lineups in baseball. In New York, he allowed five hits and one run over seven innings to defeat the Yankees on Saturday, June 24.

Bibens-Dirkx's success has been emotional for Keizerites like city councilor Ronald Herrera, who coached him as a 13-year-old little leaguer and followed his career since.

Herrera watched Bibens-Dirkx's first start with his stepdad Jeff McDonnell and former McNary athletic director Mike Maghan.

"It was very emotional for a lot of us," Herrera said. "I was teary eyed. The whole thing is so incredible. It's a movie. Austin has put our town on the map. He was always a scrapper, always hustling. It's a lesson to kids to stick with what you really believe and love. Austin had a dream and he never gave up. It's the best example I've seen of hard work and determination."

In Texas for the National Association of Latino Elected Officials Annual Conference, Herrera went to the Rangers game on Wednesday, June 21. He then watched Bibens-Dirkx start against the Yankees from a sports bar in Dallas.

"It gave me goosebumps to walk into the stadium and see him on the field down there," Herrera said.

Bibens-Dirkx entered his next start, Thursday, June 29 in Cleveland, with a 3-0 record and 3.68 ERA over 36 and two-thirds of an inning.

"I'm enjoying every second that I'm up here," Bibens-Dirkx said. "I'm going to try to take full advantage of every opportunity that they give me and hopefully it's enough to stick around. If not, I'll go down and do everything I can to scrape my way back."

FLAGS,

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because of their wives friendship.

A native Iowan, Nordyke ended up in Oregon in 1980 after retiring from the Corps. He had been stationed in New Orleans and continued to live there after he retired, but his friend, an Oregonian, suggested that Nordyke move to Oregon where the economy was booming and jobs were available for the picking.

So, he and his wife packed up and sold their home, moving across country for the promise of a job. It wasn't long after relocating that Nordyke found a job and bought a house in Keizer.

"I went to work at the penitentiary for 16 years," he said.

He and his wife settled in and set about making Keizer home. They became involved in the local Elks club, the VFW, the American Legion and the Fleet Reserve.

When Nancy's mother was looking for a place to retire, they suggested Oregon and then helped her relocate to the area. And when she passed away, they buried her in Claggett Cemetery.

"We came out to put flowers on her (Nancy's) mother's grave," Nordyke said, remembering how it all began. It was a holiday, though he is not sure anymore which one it was. The veteran's graves were bare. There were no flags, nothing there to pay tribute to their service and sacrifice.

"I said right there this is a no-no," Nordyke said.

He went out and bought 100 small flags mounted on dowels. Armed and ready, he went out to the cemetery and placed flags at each veteran's grave. He has not missed a holiday since.

These days the Claggett Cemetery caretaker buys the flags, though Nordyke continues to go and put them out, making repairs and cleaning them once they are collected.

It is the least he can do, to make sure their service is not forgotten.

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