

St. Clement basketball reunion honors late deacon who never stopped giving to Lansdowne

When St. Clement I Parish in Lansdowne holds a basketball reunion April 7, it's appropriate that former players and coaches will gather a half-mile to the west, at the Leadership Through Athletics gym.

The private LTA facility is a good work of the Grace family. The Grace brothers all played Catholic Youth Organization basketball for St. Clement in the 1960s and '70s, and thus experienced the positive influence of the man who got hundreds of youths involved in the game.

In addition to serving the Knights of Columbus, Holy Name Society, the Ancient Order of Hibernians and Mount St. Joseph High School, his prep alma mater, the late Deacon John "Jack" McKenna began an intramural basketball program at St. Clement, which developed into a large CYO footprint for the parish.

"Every year we induct people into our (LTA) Hall of Fame, and he was one of the first to get in," said Dr. Tom Grace, who was in the class of 1969 at the former St. Clement School. "Mr. Jack was the real deal, he provided direction for so many people, not with what he said, but with what he did. If he wasn't coaching or keeping the scorebook, he was volunteering at the concession stand.

"He first put a basketball in my hand when I was in the sixth grade. Our father was self-employed, and told us, 'St. Clement is starting a basketball program, and you're going to play,' to keep us busy."

It helped that it was a family affair.

Grace's father and Madalen Grace McKenna, Deacon Jack's wife, were first cousins. When the McKenna's daughter, Madalen Kight, coached a CYO championship team in 1973, her players included Kelly Kreiner Grace, who is married to the third of the Grace brothers, Pat.

Back then, Madalen Kight was a sophomore at the former Archbishop Keough High School. Her three brothers followed their father to Mount St. Joseph, where he was active in alumni affairs.

As his daughter Madalen tells it, Deacon McKenna lacked direction after the death of his father until, as a teen, he encountered Father Canice Gardiner, then a Passionist seminarian in Irvington, who introduced him to the game of basketball.

His daughter, Madalen, noted that "Basketball is a team sport and it took a team of dedicated volunteers helping my father to run the program," she said. Those volunteers included her mother, who ran the concession stand.

A U.S. Air Force veteran and civil servant with multiple degrees from what was then Loyola College, Deacon McKenna led his parish's participation in SHARE, the former food co-op that was organized by Catholic Charities of Baltimore. Ordained to the permanent diaconate in 1987, he died in 2016.

By then the St. Clement basketball program had closed along with its school, which now houses Sisters Academy of Baltimore, an independent school for girls in grades 5-8.

Neighborhood youths, as well as an attorneys' league, wheelchair players, and, on a recent Saturday, the Filipino community, find a haven at the LTA gym, which the Grace family opened in 2004.

Tom Grace, a plastic surgeon, and his three brothers went to the former Cardinal Gibbons High School after St. Clement. Tom, Michael and Patrick all serve on the board of LTA, which, according to its mission statement, provides “programs and opportunities that encourage leadership and values development, enhance educational experiences, and promote health and fitness.”

It’s appropriate that the St. Clement reunion at LTA will be held in the middle of the Final Four, college basketball’s biggest weekend, as Tom and his wife, Terri, the parents of six children, have two sons who were walk-on players at three-time NCAA champion Villanova University.

Tom was a senior in 2005, when the Wildcats lost by one point to eventual champion North Carolina in the Sweet 16. Denny was a practice player in 2016, when Villanova won it all, and suited up for the 2018 NCAA champions.

For more information about the reunion, email Madalen@leadershipthroughathletics.org or call 410-242-0039.

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