

The house that Renee Buettner built

St. Francis of Assisi School in the Mayfield neighborhood of the city is among the success stories in the Archdiocese of Baltimore's Department of Catholic Schools. Renee Buettner, who died Jan. 15 much too young at age 70 of complications from Alzheimer's disease, contributed mightily to it having a student body that is bursting with small children.

More about that later. First let's talk about Renee the coach.

Spend more than three decades writing about sports for a living, like I did, and you will encounter some memorable coaches. My first was my brother, Tim, who went from coaching my seventh-grade CYO basketball team at St. Rose of Lima to Brooklyn Park High School, where in the late 1970s his baseball program knocked heads against other state champion contenders, all of whom practiced better fundamentals than what you saw at Oriole Park in recent seasons.

In between writing for the Capital-Gazette and The Sun, I had the privilege of coaching the distance runners at Old Mill High School for Ron Evans, an ardent feminist with countless state championship teams. While on the University of Maryland basketball beat, Gary Williams taught me not to quantify outcomes, that there is no such thing as a bad win. Covering Michael Phelps in the Summer Olympics, you couldn't help but be influenced by Bob Bowman, who drilled into the GOAT to not let others define your limits.

We could go down that road for another 1,000 words, but that would keep us from Renee.

I was among the St. Francis of Assisi dads who helped Renee as she coached CYO teams in the 1990s for the parish. Our daughters were in the school's class of 1999. In soccer, her Mary Colleen was the goal-scoring front-runner. My Kate was the stopper back in a diamond formation that benefited from the collective aptitude of the girls, most of whom were accepted by Notre Dame Preparatory School.

Renee was a career educator, and the parents loved that shortly after her formal work day was done, 30 minutes after dismissal, we would cross Chesterfield Avenue to Herring Run Park for practice. Our girls would be sitting down to a family dinner or homework when other teams were just getting warmed up. (Oh, forgot another of my favorite coaches, my brother Kevin, newly elected to the Frederick County Soccer Hall of Fame, who, along with the late Pep Perella, gave clinics in the late 1990s for CYO soccer coaches in northeast Baltimore).

Our girls arrived home physically exhausted, as Renee ran a practice that reflected her energy. Her endurance was such that she **ran marathons and half-marathons in Baltimore**, taking age group honors and inspiring others to get moving.

Parents also knew that practice would not start without a prayer, which followed Renee asking the girls how their day had gone and if they had any special petitions. She initially came to Baltimore to study to become a Religious Sister of Mercy. As recounted by Emily Rosenthal in a **2018 Review story** timed for Valentine's Day, she met her husband, Jerry, when both were on staff at the former St. Bernard Parish. All four of their daughters went to Mercy High School.

St. Francis of Assisi School began the current school year with approximately 260 students, nearly 30 percent of them in its pre-K and kindergarten programs. Those entities originated 30 years ago in the Mayfield Christian Preschool, which Renee founded using space at St. Matthew's United Church of Christ on Lake Avenue, a 3-wood north of Clifton Park Golf Course.

In 2002, when St. Francis of Assisi Parish celebrated its 75th anniversary, Monsignor William F. Burke entrusted me with updating its history. From that book, here's what Renee told me about the preschool.

"It started on a shoestring, and was in God's hands from day one. There was a preschool room down the hall from the gym at St. Matthew's, so the space was available. It took a year to get it up and running, but a man who had grown up in Mayfield worked for the city, and helped streamline the process. We were going to have to install a fence around the play yard there, but an inspector stood outside while we played, counted two cars in a half hour and said it wouldn't be necessary."

“We had no money to start with, and we were using tables and chairs designed for much older children. I remember little Claire Maylor’s feet dangling two and a half feet off the ground. I said to Sister Judith Gallen, who was then the principal of St. Francis, ‘we have to get some tables.’ That was our first purchase. It was an exciting adventure. If a spot teaching first grade at St. Francis hadn’t opened, I’d still be there.”

It became a strong feeder for St. Francis of Assisi School, which used a capital campaign to add a third floor in the late 1990s. It would be another decade before the Mayfield preschool formally relocated to the parish school, but its space, and all those children who fill it, are another part of Renee Buettner’s legacy.