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Play4Kay has Special Meaning at Cedarville University

CEDARVILLE, OHIO – When the Cedarville women’s basketball team runs out on the court Thursday in pink jerseys, many will have as much of a personal reason for cheering as they will a sporting one. But one person’s connection goes back to the name attached to the fundraising event.

Stephanie Zonars, assistant athletic director for marketing and sponsorships, helped organize Thursday’s Play4Kay fundraiser during Cedarville’s game with Salem International at 5:30 p.m. at Callan Athletic Center at Cedarville University. Play4Kay was founded by former North Carolina State University women’s basketball coach Kay Yow. Yow, who served as head coach 34 years with more than 700 career wins, died of cancer in 2009. She started the fund in 2007, which has provided more than \$5 million for women’s cancer research.

The NCAA has embraced the Play4Kay initiative and many NCAA women’s programs play a game in memory of Yow. Cedarville hopes to raise \$500 from its "pink game" on Thursday.

Zonars met Yow when she was on staff with the Athletes in Action women’s basketball team. “She was one of those people you always gained from when you were with her,” offered Zonars. “She was just so inspiring and always dropping bits of wisdom. And you knew she had been doing it with her teams for more than 30 years.”

During a breakfast meeting with Yow, the coach shared her love of books and visiting bookstores. Zonars tossed a shot from the perimeter, “Coach, when are you going to write a book?”

“At that point in her life, she didn’t think she had the capacity — the cancer had come back a couple times — and she didn’t have any margin to write a book,” Zonars recalled. “But I remember walking out of breakfast and thinking, ‘Wouldn’t it be the coolest thing to help Coach write a book?’ I don’t know where that came from. I never really set out to be an author; it wasn’t on my radar. I believe God put that thought in my head and in my spirit.”

Several weeks after the initial suggestion, Zonars worked up her courage to call Yow and suggest a collaboration. Yow agreed to pray on it. And when Zonars called back, she said . . . “No.”

“I was discouraged,” Zonars admitted.

But undaunted, she came across a book about a lacrosse coach after she lost her battle with cancer. That title wasn’t as much autobiographical, but more testimonial. The coach’s players told the stories.

“The lightbulb went on for me,” Zonars said. “So I called her back, asked her about pursuing that idea, and she said, ‘Yes.’ But she asked me to make sure each of the player’s story’s had a second part where the principle they described was connected to Scripture. She wanted to make sure people knew that it wasn’t her wisdom, but about her relationship with God.”

Zonars regrets that Coach Yow never saw the completed volume. But she was honored when her two sisters, Susan Yow, a former Women’s National Basketball Association and college coach, and Debbie Yow, athletic director at North Carolina State, both wholeheartedly endorsed “Leader of the Pack: The Legacy of Legendary Coach Kay Yow.”

“Having her family say, ‘Yes, this represents her; this is who she was,’ meant a lot to me,” Zonars noted.

Getting ready for Thursday’s game, Zonars pulled “Leader of the Pack” from an office bookshelf and began paging through and reflecting. “As we get farther from her passing, the players on our team don’t necessarily know a lot about Coach Yow,” she said. “Events like these are a great opportunity to help people understand who she was. She knew she was probably going to die from cancer, but she put this fund in place so the movement would keep going, money would be raised and a cure found to help someone else. That was Coach Yow. She was always about other people.”

Located in southwest Ohio, Cedarville University is an accredited, Christ-centered, Baptist institution with an enrollment of 3,760 undergraduate, graduate, and online students in more than 100 areas of study. Founded in 1887, Cedarville is recognized nationally for its authentic Christian community, rigorous academic programs, strong graduation and retention rates, accredited professional and health science offerings, and leading student satisfaction ratings. For more information about the University, visit www.cedarville.edu.