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1

The little girl, only six years old, was mesmerized by what she saw. These were her idols performing today. It wasn't a famous singer or movie star. Outside of Fishers, no-one probably even knew of them. It was the little girl's sister and the members of the Hamilton Southeastern Varsity Cheer Squad. This season had been special. One filled with lots of tears when things didn't go right and lots of joy when they finally pulled it all together. For the first time in the school's history, a cheer squad from HSE had advanced to finals at the national cheer competition. They didn't win the competition, but they earned something much more important that day, a belief that nothing is impossible. It wasn't a dream easily attained and there were many obstacles that year that they had to face. Yet they had a common goal, one that their coach had instilled in each of those girls not only by her words but through her actions. That little girl was me and I remember sitting for hours watching my sister perform and hoping someday to cheer at HSE. I didn't realize as a young child what an influence this experience would have on my future and the difference Coach Johnson would make in my life.

Kaylee Johnson was raised in Indiana, attended Purdue University, and has taught Physical Education for 20 years at Hamilton Southeastern High School in Fishers, Indiana. As the coach of the HSE Varsity Cheer Team, she has led the Royals to six state championships. Coach Johnson is not only my teacher and coach but also my hero. I never remember a time when Coach Johnson has raised her voice in anger. Her strong, quiet manner inspires me to do my best. In situations where many coaches would yell

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2

and scream, Coach Johnson always makes her point but does so in a way that leaves us wanting to improve, not because she demands it, but because we know that it is possible. This impacted my life and provided a model for my future.

I feel that Coach Johnson personifies the following quote; “A difficult time can be more readily endured if we retain the conviction that our existence holds a purpose - a cause to pursue, a person to love, a goal to achieve.” Quite often, because of her quiet, reserved personality, many view Coach Johnson as a person that has little adversity in her life. She doesn’t complain about the struggles that she has endured but rather meets problems head-on and finds the positive in every situation. Coach Johnson has endured serious personal health issues in addition to trying to care for both her mother and husband as they also battle illness. I know at times she is tired and it is difficult for her to face the upcoming day, but she is always at practice at 5:45 in morning with a smile on her face and encouragement for each of the girls. She never allows her personal concerns to be taken out on us or let the anger of her situation be released through coaching.

Besides the health issues faced by Coach Johnson, she has survived what most people would consider to be the most difficult challenge faced by any parent, the death of a child. Although there is no way for me to comprehend what Coach Johnson had to and still must endure, I know that there will always be an empty place in her heart. Yet, even though she had to give up this precious gift that she was given, she found ways to

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3

continue to love, honor, and value the life of her child. She continued to make this child's presence known and felt in the lives of family and friends. Each of them wear a butterfly as a symbol of her precious life and their continuing love for her. Many parents would have chosen the path of isolation and depression and rightly so, but Coach Johnson chose to live her life more fully and generously because of this painful experience. I know this has been a long, sad journey and at times very frightening and extremely lonely because few people can understand the loss that she must still face every day. Yet, she has found a way to keep alive the memory of her child and let her short life be a gift to others. In her honor, Coach Johnson and her family established an adaptive playground for children with special needs. Now a child who would never have the opportunity to experience what many parents and children take for granted, a ride on swing, is able to do so because of Coach Johnson's dream. The DeVeau's Darlings, a special needs cheer squad founded by Coach Johnson is another example of her desire to give back to others in appreciation for all the support given to her. The Deveau's Darlings gives children who never believed they would have the opportunity to do any activities such as this, the chance to go beyond their comfort zone and do something they truly love. Coach Johnson will never forget her precious little girl but she has found ways to keep her child a cherished part of her forever.

In addition to the quality of quiet strength and service to others, she has demonstrated that a true leader is one that has the capacity to create or catch a vision and

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4

feel the thrill of a challenge. Some days, Coach Johnson is like a kid in a candy store and her excitement is contagious. We know that she works just as hard as each of us to reach our goals and that inspires us to do the same. She is never content with where we are but is always encouraging us and instilling within us the belief that nothing is impossible. Each year she establishes a theme and a symbol to help us focus on what we want to achieve. This year it is the bee. She wants us to always “bee”lieve in ourselves and in our ability to reach our goals. I have worked through some difficult situations and Coach Johnson has walked with me every step of the way and been my own personal cheerleader. Last spring, I had back surgery. I was discouraged and my recovery was too slow for my personal schedule. Yet, Coach Johnson never doubted my ability to make a full recovery and to return as a champion. Even when I gave up on myself, Coach Johnson never stopped believing in me and in time, I once again believed in my ability and rediscovered that inner strength.

Coach Johnson has taught me the value of setting goals and the importance of believing in your dreams. Although my cheer career will be ending in a few short months, the lessons taught to me by Coach Johnson, my Hoosier Hero, will last a lifetime.