

WCU Unsung Heroes – Bill Zwaan & Family



The job title of “football coach” is virtually synonymous with “tough guy” but WCU’s head football coach Bill Zwaan has never been afraid to show his softer side. Zwaan, who has been leading the Golden Rams to conference play every year for 14 straight years, has long been an advocate for both Autism Speaks and “Be the Match,” a national marrow donor program. Most autumns, Zwaan and his players take part in the Autism Walk in Philadelphia. In the spring, they hold a bone marrow drive on campus to help grow the list of potential donors. That effort has resulted in at least five WCU students being deemed a match and helping to save a life.

Zwaan also quietly demonstrates compassion in ways small and large. He has mentored and counseled countless football players over the years, offering support and advice as they struggled with family, financial, academic and health issues. But it’s not just student athletes who have benefitted from the coach’s big heart. Bill Zwaan and his family are this month’s Unsung Heroes for an act of kindness that made the holidays a bit brighter for eight WCU students.

Zwaan and his 10 siblings put together gift bags for students who stayed on campus over the holiday break. Some of these students didn’t have the ability to travel home for financial reasons; others, who grew up in foster care or are estranged from family, didn’t have the option to return home.

“I was very grateful when Coach Zwaan approached me about helping these students,” said Tori Nuccio, assistant director of Financial Aid. “When he delivered the gifts on the Monday before the break, I was overwhelmed. He and his siblings put tremendous thought and effort into their gift-giving. Each student’s gifts were tailored to his or her needs and likes, from a tire for one student who had a flat and couldn’t ride his bike to a Target gift card for a student who wanted a tapestry to brighten her room.”

Zwaan reluctantly sat down to be interviewed about his family’s holiday largesse on one condition. “I want to see the spotlight shone on the real heroes – these students who overcame a lot of obstacles to become WCU students,” he said.

Fair enough. But first, it’s important to tell Bill’s story.

There was a lot of love in the Zwaan household but with 11 children there wasn’t a lot of money. All of the kids attended Catholic grade schools and high schools, and like most kids, they always seemed to be eating and always seemed to be growing out of their clothes.

“I never felt poor but you knew you were getting socks and underwear at Christmas,” said Zwaan. “You didn’t expect a pile of gifts. I remember that my mom would always put an orange in the toe of each Christmas stocking. I think oranges must have been relatively expensive and not something she could normally buy.”

Sports were a big part of the family's life. Zwaan served as bat boy at West Catholic High School in Philadelphia for a team his father coached, and later his father coached Zwaan's own baseball team at Archbishop Carroll High School.

Zwaan received a football scholarship to the University of Delaware to play quarterback. He had a standout career at UD, where his team played in a national title game. But college was also one of the hardest times in Zwaan's life. During his sophomore year, his father passed away at the age of 45. Many people who attended the funeral talked about the impact that Zwaan's dad had made through coaching.

The seed was planted. "Hearing people share what a difference my dad had made to them helped me decide I wanted to be a coach," said Zwaan.

As one of the oldest kids in the family, it was tough staying at school. Zwaan was torn and felt he should be home more, helping his mom with his younger siblings. But he persisted in school and received a degree in marketing. His UD football coach, Tubby Raymond, helped Zwaan land his first coaching job, at Monsignor Bonner High School in Drexel Hill, Pa.

Skylar Maldonado also knows something about tough times at a young age. The 19-year-old lived in 32 foster homes and attended 29 different schools as a child and teen. Maldonado graduated from Abraham Lincoln High School in the Mayfair section of Philadelphia last year and is now a first-year student at WCU. The affable teen is majoring in social work and has a strong interest in writing.

Maldonado was one of the students who received gifts from the Zwaan family. And while the Zwaans didn't know that Maldonado loved to write, one of the gifts was, appropriately enough, a journal.

"Writing in my journal is how I kept it together over the years," said Maldonado. "People tell me I have a really good attitude and stay positive. You have to; it's the only way you are going to make it."

Another way that Maldonado keeps it together is by giving back. A Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) offered considerable support over the years. So Maldonado agreed to speak at a Pennsylvania CASA Association fundraiser, albeit reluctantly. Much like Bill Zwaan, Maldonado doesn't like to be in the spotlight. However, Maldonado knew that speaking to donors and volunteers would help other kids in the foster care system.

Maldonado received an abundance of gifts from the Zwaans, including department store gift cards and a University bookstore gift card. But like most of the other students, Maldonado didn't make specific requests.

"When I sent an email out before the holidays, asking students what they most needed, a few of them, when pressed, acknowledged that they could use a winter coat or other necessity," said Nuccio. "But for the most part, I heard things like 'don't worry about me; give a gift to a little kid instead.'"

One thing that each and every student did receive – whether they asked for it or not – was a stocking brimming over with candy and other treats. Tucked into the foot of each stocking was a fat orange, just like Bill Zwaan's mom had always done when he was a boy.

"I can't take credit for that," said Zwaan. "My sisters Mary Lou and Maureen wanted to make sure that mom's little holiday tradition, and her spirit of generosity, lived on."

Indeed, it has.