

(Featured Address by Founder and Original Head Coach Bernice Nicolari)

A long time ago, I learned one of the keys to success in life: Surround yourself with good people. Today is a perfect example.

I also learned this simple truth: Those who do not know the past cannot understand the present - or plan wisely for the future.

Today I want to talk about the past-at least for awhile; to talk about how Gaelette Basketball - in fact, the entire Women's Sports' Program at Shelton High - came to be.

Imagine a landscape with nothing on it ... That's how young women athletes viewed Shelton High until October of 1962: Absolutely nothing there ... No basketball, no softball, no track, no cross country, no soccer, no volleyball, no swimming, no tennis, no lacrosse, no ANYTHING - a completely barren landscape with nothing even remotely on the horizon.

And it had been that way forever ...

In October of 1962, three young women came to my classroom to beg me to coach a girls' basketball team which did not yet exist. They said - and I quote: "There's nothing for US! - and we want to PLAY!" I was 22-fresh out of college, newly hired, and, quite honestly, up for the challenge.

During the five years my family had lived in New Hampshire, I had played on my high school girls' basketball and softball teams-and lettered. That was the 1950s, but already New Hampshire had interscholastic sports for girls.

As I listened to the students plead their case, I knew that my answer would be Yes and that, with that Yes, we would make history. That was my first wise decision.

My second wise decision was to ask Celeste Beattie to join me as assistant coach. Celeste agreed, despite three young children at home. Celeste's daughter Jayne would grow up to become a Gaelette basketball player herself.

All of us - players and coaches alike - were young, idealistic, brimming with energy, and about to take the ride of our lives. It would be a glorious one. 1962 saw the beginning of a decade of change. Old stereotypes were dissolving; old attitudes were changing, and basic rights, long denied, would soon be demanded. But none of it would be easy ...

We called our team The Gaelettes - and began that first season with no schedule of games, no uniforms, no budget to fund anything, no gym - the boys owned that-no buses, no athletic supplies of any kind, no press coverage, and no awards banquet. We were - to put it bluntly - hanging way out on a limb, all by ourselves. Our newly formed team put together uniforms of black shorts and white shirts. Being women, we knew how to improvise.

By contrast, we saw that uniforms for the boys' varsity, junior varsity, and freshmen teams were - and always had been - paid for out of the school's athletic budget. In fact, one hundred percent of the Athletic Budget was allocated for boys' sports-yearly.

We borrowed basketballs from girls' Phys Ed, wrestled an agreement from our principal for use of half the gym when the boys weren't using it, called every school within a thirty mile radius to schedule games, and petitioned the Board of Ed for a bus for away games and officials' fees for home games.

By contrast, we saw the boys provided with a gym, a schedule of games, uniforms, every athletic supply they might possibly need, buses, paid officials, paid coaches, girls to cheer for them, guaranteed press coverage, and a big awards banquet at the end of every season.

Remember: this was 1962-ten years before Title IX. Neither Celeste nor I was paid one red cent - and would not be for many, many years -but pay was the farthest thing from our minds. By contrast, we saw that all head coaches and all assistant coaches of all boys' teams at Shelton High were - and always had been - compensated for their services - and we did not begrudge them that. But we also saw that the doors that were slamming in our faces were not slamming in theirs. In the beginning -1962 - there was NO administrative support at the high school for girls' inter-scholastic sports. Let me be as clear about that as I can: My principal was royally ticked off with me for daring to upset what he considered to be the natural order of things. "BOYS compete," he told me. "Girls CHEER." Now, isn't that just the DUMBEST thing you've ever heard? I certainly thought so-and I was not alone.

My father, for example, knew from his years in the Army exactly how to size up a man. When I repeated my principal's statement to him, my father's blunt assessment was: "That fellow's been drinking STUPID juice!" My father was right - as you will see in a moment. My father respected women - which was lucky for his three daughters since our mother had died young, but WE had a man in our lives who thought WE could do ANYTHING.

My principal, on the other hand, faced quite a dilemma: how to deal with these women who clearly did not see themselves as inferior to anyone and who were absolutely delighted to be competing! Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist, Connie Schultz, reminds us that, "Courage in women is often mistaken for insanity." MY principal certainly thought I was insane, but then Harvard professor, Laurel Thatcher, wisely observes that "Well - behaved women rarely make history." The Shelton Gaelette Basketball Team intended to make history - with or without anyone's blessing.

But just so you know: my principal's direct orders to me 50 years ago were the following:

First: The Gaelettes were to receive NOT ONE CENT-(those were his exact words)-from the school's athletic budget. And then he said: "If you want a girls' team, you'll have to fund it yourself." I remind you: I was 22 - and today, that would be called discrimination.

Second: We could use the gym ONLY-(his emphasis)-only when the boys did not need it. Today, that's called discrimination.

Third: We were NOT-(HIS emphasis)-to post notices of our games in the Daily Bulletin or over the Public Address system as the boys did. "Nobody wants to watch girls play," he told me.

And finally, we would be listed in the Yearbook as a Club, NOT as a varsity sport. "The Sports Section is for boys," he said.

Fifty years ago, in 1962, that was the kind of nonsense women had to confront-and those who know me best know that "nonsense" was not my first choice of word here. We might have been young, but we were old enough to understand that there are really only two kinds of people in this life: those who blindly obey and those who improvise.

Celeste Beattie and I fell into the second category: We improvised. We held car washes. My sisters and I ran tag sales. My OTHER sisters at Albertus Magnus College prayed for us. No man on earth-no matter how much stupid JUice he consumes-has more authority than the Dominican nuns at Albertus Magnus College. Right, Lynne Farrell? Lynne and I were college mates. She knows exactly what I'm talking about.

SO ... we're holding car washes, we're running tag sales, and the nuns are praying. . We scheduled the gym at the local Boys' Club-and, yes, it was the BOYS' Club in the center of town, not the Boys' and Girls' Club as it is today. We used the school's "rumor mill" to spread word of our games. Every woman knows how to do that. And finally, because I was an English teacher, I volunteered to be Yearbook Advisor as soon as the position became open.

And the lesson here is this: When someone purposely puts obstacles in your path, you always have a choice. You can think long and hard and figure a way around those obstacles, or you can quit. For me and Celeste Beattie, quitting was never an option.

We did, however, have some support: from colleagues, women and men both, and from most parents - except the father who thought I was brainwashing his daughter with the dangerous notion of equality, and didn't I know that women were not equal to men and never would be. And, yes, he actually said that, and I cannot imagine the nightmare of living in that home ...

Also on our side were Assistant Superintendent of Schools Ed Finn and one Board of Ed member named Anthony Maturo. Why these two men championed us I will never know

- perhaps just their sense of fairness - but they did, and we appreciated it. Other than that, we were on our own ... on the Road to Glory.

But I repeat: *We intended* to make history, to do what writer Connie Schultz advised and "soar high above those well-behaved women still stuck on the ground."

That first season, we played 12 games and won 10. We practiced hard, played hard, and showed our school - but, most important of all, showed *ourselves-just* how great highly motivated young women could be. And when my players asked me: "But who will cheer for *us*?", I said what women have said for centuries: "*We* will cheer for ourselves."

For every one of our 17 seasons, it was a hard and fast rule on our team that our players would cheer loudly from the bench for their teammates on the court, since-just as the boys owned the gym - they also owned the cheerleaders.

As our Gaelettes made school, Valley, Housatonic League, and Connecticut State history, every player on our bench cheered for her teammates on the court. Women helping women ...

There *were* other rules we lived by-for example, we refused to dissolve into tears, pout and sulk, or throw hissy fits. That behavior would have labeled our young women athletes "too emotional" to compete, and we were not about to put targets on our backs for the benefit of those who wanted to see us fail. We knew the Athletic Director at Indiana State University had justified his ban on women's competitive athletics by stating, in writing, that "Girls are psychologically unfit to compete because they will cry all the time if they lose."

Now, you *know* how my father would size up this man. He'd say: "That fellow's been drinking STUPID juice!" And he'd be right. Think for just a moment of the long history of emotional displays exhibited by male athletes and coaches. I refer to such behavior as chair throwing, basketball hurling, bench kicking, player shoving, player punching, and fan-attacking during the actual playing of a game-yet I have seen *no* Athletic Director *ever* write that "Boys are psychologically unfit to compete because they lose complete control of themselves when they don't win." This would *not* be the behavior of the Shelton Gaelettes.

Finally, it was a rule on our team that the coach would be addressed as "Coach" . That took some getting used to by girls who hadn't had female role models as they were growing up, but it was crucial to a certain mindset, a mindset that said: "*We're* varsity athletes, too - and don't you forget "it "

For ten years, the Basketball Gaelettes were the *only* girls' team at Shelton High - ten long years with not another team in sight. Seems unbelievable now, doesn't it? Finally, softball with Coach Marilyn Mueller and track with Coach Ellen Duboff came in, but for ten long years, Gaelette basketball players and their coaches were alone in the

trenches, fighting all the battles that needed to be fought: for equal opportunity, for equal access, and for equal recognition.

From the beginning, Celeste and I had decided that, just as the boys could earn varsity letters, so could the girls. Just as the boys could earn varsity jackets, so could the girls. This was, after all, what I had experienced on my teams in New Hampshire. When we went public with this assumption, you would have thought we had exploded a nuclear bomb. Understand something clearly here about attitudes in the 1960s: It was *not* that the boys' teams and their coaches considered us enemies; it's that they didn't consider us *at all*. We did not register on their radar. We were *invisible-like* servants at a dinner party.

In any event, I made our case before the all-male Athletic Committee of the Board of Ed, somehow won approval, and settled in for a season of cold shoulders and hard stares. But at least I didn't get "mooned". When Congresswoman Pat Schroeder visited the high school in her Colorado district after the passage of Title IX, the boys' basketball coach said to his players: "Boys, show the Congresswoman what we think of Title IX." - whereupon his team turned their backs, dropped their shorts, bent over, and "mooned" Congresswoman Schroeder. And the coach did not get fired, and the boys did not get reprimanded, and the local TV newsman thought it very funny, but, of course, we're not dealing with high I.Q.s here.

But regarding our varsity jackets: We won approval, but there *was* one catch, and it was this: The varsity jackets the *girls* were to receive would have *fake* leather sleeves instead of the more expensive *real* leather sleeves on the boys' jackets. Now, seriously, can *anyone* in this room who knows me see me agreeing to that? Every person in this room who has ever felt the sting of discrimination, who has *purposely* been made to feel inferior - or, *worse*, watched it happen to their *children* - *will* understand my rage. You will also understand that, for me and Celeste, the issue was *not* the sleeves; it was the *principle* involved: OUR kids will get fake stuff while YOUR kids get the real thing? Not in this life! Women handle budgets, right? You SHOULD. If you feel your kids deserve something because they've *really* earned it, you figure out a way to find the money, don't you. The varsity jackets awarded to the Shelton Basketball Gaelettes had *real* leather sleeves. We would settle for nothing less. And the lesson here is this: If you signal that you are willing to *accept* unequal treatment - whether at home or in the workplace - that is *exactly what you will get*. WE would not accept it.

In 1974, two years after Title IX became law - and twelve long years after the Founding of Gaelette basketball - we few women coaches at Shelton High threatened to sue our school Board for the equal working conditions and equal pay that Title IX guaranteed - at least on paper. *Years* would pass before we got anything close, but history tends to forget the two Connecticut women who paved the way for the rest of us.

When Title IX became law in 1972, most school systems through-out the country- including here in Connecticut - were not eager to abide by its provisions-and *did* not.

What they *were* eager to do was protect the boys' programs that had flourished unchallenged for decades. Therefore, they stalled ... and stalled ... and stalled. It is a *mistake* to believe that Title IX was a "magic wand" that brought about instant equality. That is NOT the way it happened, and women today need to know that. Two years after Title IX became law and was being ignored in many school systems throughout the country, Lea Dickson and Barbara Hall challenged, in court, their school system's blatant inequality. These coaches at Bunnell High School and Stratford High were the first Connecticut women to sue their school system for what Title IX guaranteed: equality of opportunity, access, and working conditions. Shelton watched to see what would happen. Since neither Lea nor Barbara was a tenured teacher, both were risking everything, but both felt so strongly about what was, by any standard, gross discrimination that - as courageous women have done throughout history - they took a stand. They filed complaint with the Department of Labor, the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights, the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women, and the Equal Employment Opportunities' Commission. As Barbara Hall said: "You *have* to stand up for what you believe in and have the courage to risk *everything* for what is right .. " I want to repeat that so that everyone in this room remembers it: "You *have* to stand up for what you believe in - and have the courage to risk *everything* for what is right." THAT is what it meant to be a woman willing to fight. THAT is what it meant to refuse to be "well - behaved."

As an example: In 1973, a full year after Title IX had passed, the Stratford High Athletic Director- who will go unnamed - told Barbara Hall when she asked for girls' basketball uniforms to simply use old *boys'* basketball uniforms, rather than spend money on the girls. To quote me and a million other fighting women: "Not in THIS life!"

When Barbara then mentioned uniforms for her softball team, this same athletic director told her to use the *same* uniforms for basketball *and* softball. I am NOT making this up . I repeat: This was AFTER Title IX!

And there's my father now - sizing up this man: "That fellow's been drinking STUPID juice!" Makes you wonder if there's a franchise somewhere, doesn't it. Picture this: Basketball season has ended. The boys on the basketball team hand their uniforms over to the boys on the baseball team. Are you picturing it? *Never. Happen.* Never even be *suggested.* Yet that is *exactly* what Barbara Hall was ordered to do. These are the *deliberate* insults women coaches and athletes were subjected to-even after Title IX. I *told* you: There *are* no magic wands. You have to FIGHT.

Earlier, I said that there are really only two kinds of people in this life: those who fold and those who fight.

It took *four years* for Lea Dickson and Barbara Hall's lawsuit to be won in court. That's right: the *implementation* of Title IX had to be ordered by the courts in every state where a lawsuit was filed. Six years - SIX - after Title IX became the law of the land- November, 1978 -a landmark court case -"United States District Court Civil Action

B-77-41 "-established a legal mandate *requiring* "Equal terms and conditions of employment, regardless of the group to be coached".

In other words, the court decreed that female athletes and female coaches *MUST, by law,* receive the *same* opportunities and the *same* benefits as male athletes and coaches.

Six years after Title IX-1978, *not* 1972 - Lea Dickson and Barbara Hall had opened the door to equality for all women coaches and athletes in the state of Connecticut.

I remind the young women in our audience today that *THIS* is why you have the opportunities you now have: *not* because someone waved a magic wand, but because someone dared to *fight*. You need to *thank* the women who came before you. And that is why Shelton put up no fight when its women coaches threatened to sue. They knew what had happened in Stratford, knew the legal costs involved, and were not about to fight a losing battle ... unlike the priest who was principal at St. Joe's in Trumbull. "What is this Title IX thing?" he asked his boys' basketball coach. "Are we going to have to *pay* them more?" The "them" he referred to was women. Makes you wonder what he was paying his women teachers, doesn't it ... To which the boys' basketball coach replied: "We do *NOTHING* till they *sue* us. " You're. On. And you will *lose*- again and again and again - because the courts in this country *now* say: *EQUAL* terms, *EQUAL* conditions - regardless of the group to be coached." I know Barbara Hall is here with us today so, Barb, would you please stand so we can give you a round of applause.

Meanwhile, our Gaelettes were going strong. Over the course of 17 seasons, with a 30 game schedule including CIAC tournament play, with a now-decent budget for uniforms, buses, officials, athletic supplies, and awards, these pioneering women compiled a record of 214 wins against 53 losses. That's pretty good for a group that started with nothing! They won 7 consecutive Housatonic League titles and tied for an 8th when, once upon a time, there had been no league at all. They won the 1976 CIAC Class Double L State Championship before 3,000 screaming fans when, once upon a time, they had played to empty gyms. They posted three undefeated seasons, four seasons with only one loss, and winning streaks of 27 and 30 games. They were ranked 12th in the nation by the National Sports-writers' Poll when, once upon a time, they did not even *EXIST*-and were not *supposed* to exist!

And *I* remembered all the things they told us girls could not do ... But how, you might ask, did you get any Press coverage? Now, that's a question you don't have to ask today. Well, I'll tell you how we got Press coverage ... The Sports' Editor of *The Evening Sentinel*, the daily Valley newspaper that covered *every* boys' game in *every* sport, and the Sports' Editor of the weekly *Suburban News*, each said to me-and I quote: "You want *coverage*?" (I could hear the incredulity in their voices.) And then they said: "Write it up yourself and drop it off. We don't cover girls."

Now there's an important lesson here, and it is this: When someone tries to make you *invisible-and keep* you invisible-you *must fight it*. After every game-after the locker room had cleared out, after everything had been put away, after all the players had gone home-my final task of the night was to sit in my office at my typewriter, review the stats

and the game as a sports' reporter would, and write up an article for the next day's newspaper. Then - and Celeste can vouch for every word I say - I would close up the locker room, risk life and limb on the ice in the parking lot where mine was the last car there, crawl through the back window of my station wagon whose doors were frozen shut, and slide through the streets from Shelton to Ansonia to drop off my article so the Gaelettes would have coverage in the next day's local sports' section. No article? No coverage. That was the deal. And this was before laptops and email. Fortunately, I was an English teacher, and writing was in my genes. The articles were fine because I knew how to write them. Not a word was ever changed - except when the printer goofed. For the weekly *Suburban News*, I'd pick a really good student from one of my English classes, and she'd become our student reporter. She'd write up the weekly articles, I'd check her copy, and she'd deliver them to the paper with her byline on them. GREAT experience for college ... And THAT is how we got Press coverage. By contrast, *every* boys' game in *every* varsity sport was covered by *every* regional newspaper, and articles appeared in *every* next day's sports' section.

Seventeen glorious seasons passed this way, and then it was time to step aside. I recommended Howie Gura to succeed me because I knew the man, knew he'd be excellent, and he never once disappointed me.

Mark Lewis, the veteran Sports' Editor of the *New Haven Register*-- who, by the way, wrote his *own* articles-asked me in an interview: "Coach, did you ever imagine when you began that you would accomplish so much?" "Yes," I answered honestly, "because I always believed we *could*. And so did my players ... "

It was the talent, determination, and unselfish excellence of our young women that twice got me, the woman whose principal thought she was insane, named Coach of the Year. I want you to know that I know to whom the credit is due. I speak the truth when I tell you that it was the quality of our young players-those amazing young women who *refused* to sit on the sidelines, who were determined to *soar* above the well-behaved crowd - that placed me in five Basketball Halls of Fame, my Assistant Coach Celeste Beattie in two Halls of Fame, and my successor Howard Gura in two Halls of Fame.

And I repeat: We *know* to whom the credit is due. It is due to our players. My words are not meant to boast or brag. In the immortal words of Dizzy Dean: "It ain't braggin' if you *done* it." My words are meant to prove to you just how highly respected the Gaelettes and their coaches had become throughout the state of Connecticut - so respected that, just this past April, one of the three girls who had convinced me fifty years ago to launch a team, was inducted into the prestigious Connecticut Women's Basketball Hall of Fame.

That woman, Elaine Biercevicz Piazza-your director of ceremonies this afternoon and an accomplished athlete, coach, career woman, mother, grandmother, Tap-Off Club Hall of Famer, Connecticut Amateur Softball Hall of Famer, and Connecticut Women's Basketball Hall of Famer-understands what we all understand: that honors are *never* too late to be embraced-and that every *individual* honor is an *opportunity to praise your*

teammates. And that's why *next* Sunday will see Elaine inducted into the Northeast Hall of Fame-an honor to *her* and, *through*. her, to her Gaelette teammates. That first Golden Group of players - and all the young women who have followed in their footsteps - had *wanted* to make history, and so they did.

To all those, young and old, who have sat here patiently listening to our history, my message is simply this: ALL the benefits young women have today were *hard won*. Earlier generations of women *fought hard* - not only for the benefits you enjoy today, *but for the very right to exist at all*. NONE of it was a given. We dug in our heels. We stood our ground. We absolutely *refused* to remain invisible. We fought hard for equal access to *every privilege automatically* afforded male athletes. We built a strong, successful, highly respected program where *nothing* had existed before - a program that worked like a well - oiled machine - and then, when it was time, Celeste and I stepped aside and passed it on to others, confident that the foundation was solid and the structure was lasting.

And 50 years later, we're still here ... at least up to now ... I refer, of course, to the recent abomination enacted by the Shelton Board of Ed called "pay-to-play". Sounds like a "crap shoot", doesn't it?

Pay-to-play is, *by its very nature*, DISCRIMINATORY. In a *public* school system, pay-to-play stands for *everything* that Gaelette basketball and its Founders fought *against*: discrimination against a SPECIFIC group of students - in this case, *economic* discrimination. Had pay-to-play existed in my high school, neither I nor my teammates would have been able to play. Our parents could not have afforded it - nor should they have had to.

As I look at past team photographs, I know for a fact that *most* of the young women standing so proudly in their team uniforms - most of the women here today - would *not* have been there, had pay-to-play existed then.

Would all the Gaelette women over the past 50 years please stand? All of you - players, managers, team reporters - please stand so we can see you. All this talent would have been denied because of a discriminatory policy called pay-to-play. I have *seen* discrimination. It is UGLY. It's the look on a child's face when you tell him: "Oh, no, *you* can't play - unless you give me money." It's a parent's guilt - and anger - because the extra money's *just not there*.

Understand something here: We're not talking 25 or 50 dollars. We're talking hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of dollars - per child, per sport, per year. *Somebody's been drinking STUPID juice!*

THIS is how you destroy successful programs. THIS is how you *humiliate* children and their parents. To quote my doctor: This is Shelton, *not* Greenwich. This is the Valley, *not* the Gold Coast. We don't DO this to our children here - except now we do - in Shelton.

Pay-to-play mocks *everything* that public school education is supposed to be about. With pay-to-play, the Shelton Board of Education has moved from *gender* discrimination 50 years ago to *economic* discrimination today. And THAT is unforgivable ... There was a saying that came out of the Civil Rights Movement in the turbulent Sixties when our Gaelettes were born-and it was this: "Let us not envy the young their opportunities-for they are the best proof we have that what we did mattered."

On this, the 50th Anniversary Celebration of Gaelette Basketball, the coaches seated before you want to thank all who helped make our success possible. We especially thank the parents who so proudly supported their daughters' athletic endeavors.

Every coach joins me in acknowledging that courageous band of women coaches who sacrificed so *much* in the early years so that their young women could compete.

THIS generation must remember that *an entire older generation* of women is passing - women who made possible all that you have today. YOU OWE THEM. You owe them your *gratitude*, your *respect*, your *duty* to *excel* and NOT take for granted what they worked so hard to give you.

It's been a glorious ride, and I am grateful I have lived long enough to tell you this. To every Gaelette sitting before me, but *especially* to those wonderful Pioneers, I want to tell you this: I *never* forgot you. I *never* forgot your courage. There are *no* words adequate enough to express my pride in you. *Together*, we made a difference. What *we* did mattered. And I want you *never* to forget that ...