Written by Kathleen McCarthy
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Our community lost one of its treasures, former Bettendorf football coach Merv Habenicht, on Wednesday, May 16, 2012, after a prolonged battle with pulmonary fibrosis. For many of us, we lost a surrogate father and/or lifelong friend.

Nearly 45 years ago, when I left private school to attend Bettendorf Middle School, I was befriended by its most popular cheerleader, Nan Habenicht – Merv's and Eveyln's firstborn – and was unconditionally inducted into the Habenicht family from day one. I wish I had a nickel for each time I bravely huffed out on my own family to brave the cold, cruel world for the several blocks to the Habenichts, where I nestled in until I wore out my welcome.

Most of the time, I had to get in line, literally, because Merv and Evelyn had an open-door policy for their children's friends, and Merv's students and team members. It has remained so until this day. They truly are like second parents to me and to many others who had the incredible good fortune to find their fold. I could not love them more, and losing Merv is a blow that no amount of time will ever completely heal.

I continue to marvel at how much trust both Merv and Evelyn could engender in teens, many of whom hailed from categorically different backgrounds. There were no sacred cows, other than football, and their engagement with kids went well beyond the superficial. Some of us were taken into their home for extended periods. While my family had its problems, my parents were loving and committed, but many of Merv's team members thrived primarily because the Habenichts provided the only stability and daily concern these kids knew. Whether tutoring at the kitchen table or providing countless meals or weekend activities, the list of special attentions is exhaustive, continuing throughout Merv's 40-year career of teaching and coaching.

Besides coaching, Merv also taught history and driver's education as part of his tenure at Bettendorf High School. I can personally attest to learning the importance of combining driving skills with the concept of "errands." Merv demonstrated how proper driving can almost always coincide with picking up dry-cleaning and grocery items, and the occasional stop at A&W, equating nicely with function and purpose as necessary life skills in the bigger scheme of things.

In retrospect, both Merv's and Evelyn's recurring attribute for dealing with so many and varied teens was an uncanny blend of listening, humor, and discipline achieved through mutual respect. Of all the things I remember about Merv and the Habenicht household, the laughter stands out. It was constant. Even navigating the most troubled waters of life, there was always humor peeking in and out, escaping the confines of the storms. I believe that humor is one of highest forms of intelligence, so that makes the Habenichts a family of geniuses. Anyone who knows Merv and Evelyn will attest to the easy laughter that marks their company. Not only is such humor balm for the soul at the time; it makes for the best possible memories.

It is hard to qualify a stellar 40-year coaching career, adoring one Irish beauty (Evelyn Halligan) for 58 years, and raising five remarkable children (Nan, Bobby, Kurt, Karen – affectionately called Tweedy – and Jill), with a whole tribe of grandchildren and great grandchildren, as anything less than exemplary.

And even though Merv had his own challenges, he also had enough faith and character to face those challenges, and turn them into something positive by which to inspire and teach. For Merv, it was that simple. He always queried our well-being, but never pushed; no judgment, just a clear desire to help if he could. The wow factor was that, with Evelyn's help, they often made a monumental difference.

Whenever I reminisce about Merv and Evelyn, I have a difficult time even thinking of one without the other. I never knew a couple so cleaved, yet the embodiment of two such distinct individuals. I am describing two hugely type-A personalities here, not a yin/yang thing – more like two forces of nature that have "hooked up" for a lifetime.

Type-A personalities are a prerequisite for coaching football, so what does it tell you that in his phenomenal career, Merv led the Bettendorf Bulldogs to five state championships and an outstanding 228-70-1 record, and he coached 15 playoff teams and 70 all-state players, including Iowa's own Tavian Banks, who was more like a son to Merv and Evelyn? Merv also enjoys a much-deserved place in the Iowa Sports Hall of Fame.

In a wonderful testimony to his tremendous contributions, the Bettendorf School Board voted unanimously to name the Bettendorf football game field after Merv Habenicht in honor of his remarkable achievements and the love the community has for this one-of-a-kind icon. A fund

has been established by the not-for-profit Bettendorf Booster Club (in care of Mark Brooks; Athletic Director; 3333 18th Street; Bettendorf, Iowa 52722) to re-turf the game field, as well as the practice/soccer field, and is now accepting donations. Merv's fans can also weigh in to share thoughts, feelings, and memories by visiting RCReader.com/y/merv .

There is great joy and comfort in Merv's enduring legacy, that those who knew Merv will honor his memory in a thousand different ways: personal achievements not otherwise possible without his influence; kindnesses toward others learned from his example; consistent interest in others' children uncommon in many adults; unceasing devotion to spouse and family; and humor all along the way. Have no doubt that in the great scrimmage of heaven, Merv is not only coaching; he is entertaining.