



DAVID FAWCETT | INSIDENOVA

## Glen Strickland retires after coaching Osbourn tennis for 43 years

» BY DAVID FAWCETT  
dfawcett@insidenova.com

Glen Strickland grabs a broom and starts pushing water off the court he will use for the first day of Osbourn High School's boys tennis practice.

He prefers this court because it is closest to the entrance gate and the school, but no other court requires Strickland's attention anyway. Confirmation of that came a few moments earlier when Nelson Palacios handed his completed paperwork to the school's athletic trainer, Jeane Ryder. Ryder checked everything and then told Strickland it was official. He has his team. All two of them. Practice could begin.

The scene is a far cry from Osbourn's heyday under Strickland. From 1997 to 2003, the Eagles reached the state tournament four times. Then an average of 20 boys showed up for practice. The girls experienced the same high turnout as well when Strickland was still coaching them in the fall from the late 1990s to 2003. One year, 30 girls tried out, forcing Strickland to do something he'd never done before: make cuts.

Now he faces a new reality: Demographic changes at Manassas' lone high school have led to a decline in interest as athletes choose other sports such as soccer if they play any sports at all. The pandemic didn't help.

"It's an uphill battle, but it always is," Strickland says in his matter-of-fact tone. There is no resignation or bitterness in his voice. No longing for better days. He accepts the situation as it is with one mission: "You do your job, and I will do mine."

And he will do his job, at least for another season. After 43 years coaching Osbourn boys tennis and 44 years teaching overall, the 69-year-old Strickland is retiring at the end of this school year.

His departure is worth noting for two historic reasons. He entered the school year as the only "Original Eagle" still on staff since Osbourn opened in 1977. And on a broader scale, he is the longest-serving head coach for the same sport at the same school among the Prince William area's three school districts.

But none of this matters to Strickland, even while he

“

*"I think he's always just enjoyed coaching, not because of any personal accolades, but to have his kids be successful. I don't think he would still be coaching after all of these years if that wasn't the case."*

— DAVE RAO, FORMER OSBOURN TENNIS STANDOUT ON GLEN STRICKLAND



Osbourn coach Glen Strickland helps sophomore Nelson Palacios on the first day of practice April 19.

DAVID FAWCETT | INSIDENOVA

confronts the possibility Osbourn will go winless this season.

"It's never easy to lose a match, but I ask myself, 'Are the kids playing better?'" Strickland said. "The answer is usually yes. If it's yes, that's not a bad day in tennis."

So on this Monday afternoon in mid-April with a cloudless sky, a dry court and pleasant 64-degree temperatures, Strickland turns his attention to Palacios.

In his customary quiet Southern lilt formed growing up in the small town of Pennington Gap tucked in

a corner of southwest Virginia that borders Kentucky and Tennessee, Strickland tells Palacios where to stand when he serves the ball. Strickland then steps back and watches Palacios and senior Quinn Wescott volley back and forth.

Another season is underway.

### CREATURE OF HABIT

Strickland was in the Osbourn teacher's lounge one day when then-athletic director Tim Sarver approached him with a question: Would Strickland take over as the Eagles' boys tennis coach?

Strickland agreed by nodding his head and saying he'd do it.

He played tennis on the side at his alma mater, East Tennessee State University, as a way to stay in shape. He knew how to keep score. He had experience coaching a sport (junior varsity football) as a first-year teacher when Osbourn opened the year before.

And tennis made sense to him.

"It was a good fit," Strickland said. "There's a rule book, and everything is in the rule book. It jives with me. I'm a creature of habit."

One thing, though, remained uncertain.

"I had no idea it would last this long," Strickland said.

STRICKLAND » PAGE 19

Strickland stopped coaching the girls after the fall of 2003 when the Virginia High School League moved Group AAA girls tennis to the spring. Unable to coach both teams at the same time, Strickland stuck with the boys.

Strickland's steady hand through the years has allowed the school's activities directors to never worry about the tennis teams.

Current AD Ira DeGrood calls Strickland a "legend," a "pillar" and an "icon." But mostly, DeGrood said Strickland will be missed.

"It will be different when he's gone," DeGrood said. "He doesn't do this for the accolades. He loves kids. He has a passion for kids."

Strickland developed a strong rapport with his players through a caring and honest approach that allowed them to grow and build their confidence.

Dave Rao starred for Osbourn from 1994-98. As the Eagles' No. 1 singles player, Rao went 11-1 during the regular season his senior year. He won the Cardinal District title and helped Osbourn reach the state tournament in only its second season as a Group AAA school.

Rao had played tennis only as an individual when he arrived at Osbourn as a freshman. So the team concept was new to him.

But Strickland's calming influence challenged Rao to become a leader. At 5-foot-9, Strickland is not a towering figure physically, but he knows how to make his point.

"He could sense when I was pushing too hard during a match and would call me over and say a few simple words that would help me get back to my typical game," said Rao, now a lawyer in Washington.

Strickland affected Rob Sievers the same way.

"His approach was largely hands off," said Sievers, who played for Strickland from 1991-94 and is now a lawyer in Charlottesville. "He wasn't a technical coach or a rah-rah coach. When he did speak, however, I listened, and I listened intently. He had the great ability to be a friend, all the while clearly and effectively maintaining his role as teacher and coach."

One of Sievers' favorite memories is one many of Strickland's former players can attest to as well.

Strickland once owned a beat-up truck, which he jokingly called his "Lamborghini."

Strickland told his players if they behaved, he'd let them take his truck to the prom. Strickland's players knew he was kidding, but Sievers loves to share that story because it captures Strickland's personality and his ability to connect with his kids through a dry sense of humor.

"Whenever I see or talk with Mr. Strickland, I always ask how the truck is doing and is it still available for prom," Sievers said. "Only if you've been behaving, he'll say."

As much as Strickland means to his former players, they mean as much to



Glen Strickland entered the school year as the only "Original Eagle" still on staff since Osbourn opened in 1977.

DAVID FAWCETT | INSIDENOVA

him, if not more. Strickland still has the signed Hank Aaron baseball Sievers gave Strickland after Sievers met Aaron in Atlanta. Aaron agreed to autograph the ball on one condition: Never sell it. Strickland obliged. The ball is in his bedroom.

"I think he's always just enjoyed coaching, not because of any personal accolades, but to have his kids be successful," Rao said. "I don't think he would still be coaching after all of these years if that wasn't the case."

#### MOVING ON

Family. Technology. Age. All factored into Strickland's decision to retire from coaching and teaching. His official last day in the classroom is May 28.

"It was time," Strickland said. "There were just different things in my head. It all added up."

While he has nothing but good things to say about the current and previous administrations he's worked for, teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic took its toll at times. Even with online learning, Strickland came to school each day and taught from his classroom. Strickland said his youngest daughter, Allison, helped him adjust to the various platforms needed to teach the students virtually.

But it was still a challenge, especially for someone who isn't tech savvy.

"I'm slow to make personal changes," Strickland said.

Strickland works out four times a week, is in good health and wants to take advantage of the extra time available now.

He would like to see family members more often. Another daughter and her children live in Ireland.

He's not sure whether he and his wife of nearly 40 years, Liz, will move to the mountains (his choice) or the beach (her choice). Liz retires from her job as a home health care worker June 12.

But if he's honest, he knows the answer in deference to his college sweetheart.

"Probably the beach," Strickland said.

Strickland did not start out as a teacher.

Fresh out of college, he worked for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development after his hometown

required disaster relief following a flood.

Strickland doesn't remember what prompted him to make a career switch, but he had the credentials after earning a double major in government and education.

Looking for a place that offered a decent salary, Strickland targeted Northern Virginia, a good 400 miles from his home. He met with someone from Loudoun County about a teaching job. In fact, the person who interviewed him was Strickland's former seventh-grade shop teacher.

On his way home, Strickland stopped in the city of Manassas and filled out an application as well. Manassas called him back for an interview.

The teaching job paid the same as the government one. And it offered more time off in the summer.

But before Osbourn hired him, Strickland needed to pass principal Victor Egidi's test during the interview.

Egidi intentionally said something incorrect to see how Strickland would react. Strickland rarely raises his voice, but this time he did and corrected Egidi. Egidi got his answer. Strickland would speak up if necessary.

As he thinks back over the years, Strickland recalls the location of the original tennis courts and how the green balls constantly turned black hitting the asphalt surface. There were no lights then on the courts, and players lost track of the balls if the match ran late.

He also can cite instantly from memory the starting lineup of his 1981 Group AA state tournament team (Jeff Pope, Barry Moeller, Glenn Mosseller, Andrew Miller, Kevin Hawkins and Keith Korn) and how there was "no quit" in them. As evidence, he cites the Eagles' come-from-behind win in the district final against Handley in Winchester.

Osbourn trailed 4-2 in singles before coming back to sweep doubles and win the match 5-4.

"I have a lot of history here," Strickland said.

#### GRATEFUL

Strickland's final home match of his coaching career goes the way they've

mostly gone this spring. It finishes quickly.

On this day, Osbourn hosts regional qualifier John Champe. The match starts just after 4 p.m. and is over 27 minutes later.

The two teams resume a doubles match suspended at John Champe because of rain and then play singles. For the sake of time and based on the disparity in skill level, Strickland suggested to John Champe head coach Robert Boland the two teams play double or nothing. If Osbourn won the suspended doubles match or either of the two singles matches, then they would play additional matches.

It never comes to that. John Champe sweeps doubles 8-0 and then the two singles matches by the same score.

During both, Strickland leans on the empty bleacher facing the two courts where the teams are playing. He only ventures off twice to fetch a stray ball that's flown over the fence.

After the match, Boland asks Strickland how the season has gone. Strickland tells him they won a few more games against Unity Reed, which, like Osbourn, has low numbers. But the overall result was still the same.

Boland, who at age 25 is almost half as old as Strickland's entire coaching tenure, thanks Strickland and tells him he and his two players are headed out. The two coaches wish each other good luck.

Wescott, last year's only returner, had hoped for a better turnout. He tried to recruit more people, but it was difficult with students learning online.

Wescott was certain Osbourn would not field a boys tennis team. The Eagles had five players a year ago, including three seniors, but the pandemic cancelled the season.

But Strickland gently corrected Wescott. This still can work, Strickland told him. Instead of the regular six-on-six singles matches, Osbourn would compete with fewer participants.

Encouraged by Strickland's reassurance, Wescott did his part to generate interest. He recruited Palacios to come out. Even though the sophomore had not played tennis since he was young, he was willing to try a different sport after swimming the year before. That's all Strickland could ask for.

Wescott and Palacios are grateful to play for Strickland this one last time.

They know his saying by heart: "Be a better person tomorrow than you are today."

They appreciate his attention to detail in providing schedule updates and other administrative items.

Most of all, they are glad he stuck with them.

"He did not check out or mail it in," Palacios said.

As the two boys leave the court, Strickland reminds them about practice the next day. The season isn't over yet.

"3:45 p.m. tomorrow, gentlemen," Strickland tells them.

Then, they head down the hill together to the parking lot. It's time to go home.

# On Solid Ice

## How Potomac Patriots goalie Grace Campbell made hockey history

» BY DAVID FAWCETT  
dfawcett@insidenova.com

Grace Campbell watches the puck glide across the goal mouth, while briefly monitoring the opposing player to her right.

Backdoor plays like this usually result in a goal. But the flurry of activity in front of her only heightens Campbell's awareness. She is ready to thwart the Richmond Generals' point-blank attempt.

In a move that is part instinct and part experience, Campbell, the Potomac Patriots' Elite Junior Team goalie, shows off her range by dropping to the ice in a split and, with her extended right leg, knocking the puck away.

Afterward, the understated Campbell allows it was a "nicer save than usual."

Patriots' co-owner and managing partner RJ Zeigler is a bit more enthusiastic.

As Potomac's defense clears the puck, Zeigler, standing to Campbell's right on the walkway that circles the rink, bangs on the plexiglass to express his appreciation.

If anyone questions whether the 5-foot-7 Campbell can hold her own against bigger, stronger, quicker male players firing 70 to 80 mph pucks at her, it was another reminder to silence the doubters.

With no room for error on this recent Wednesday afternoon inside the Prince William Ice Center in Dale City, Campbell has made a sensational effort look routine.

"I don't care if you are a guy or a girl, to anticipate, move that quickly laterally and have the flexibility, those are the types of game-changing saves," Zeigler said.

### A PLACE TO PLAY

Campbell did not set out to make history. But based upon all available records, the United States Premier Hockey League confirmed Campbell is the first female goalie to compete in the USPHL junior leagues since they began in 2013.

She arrived at this milestone courtesy of COVID-19.

Campbell originally intended to go straight from high school

to college and begin her career at Boston College, one of the nation's top women's hockey programs, under head coach Katie Crowley.

But she put those plans on hold after the NCAA announced a year ago it would allow all winter athletes in Division I sports to receive an additional year of eligibility. The move was made in response to the pandemic.

At the time, Boston College had three junior goalies who opted to take the extra year.

Campbell, who graduated in May from the Shattuck-St. Mary's School in Minnesota, wanted to play college hockey as soon as possible. With four years of eligibility, she was fine waiting one year to bide her time behind upperclassmen, but not two years.

So she and the coaches decided it was best for her to take this year off and enroll at Boston College for the 2022-23 school year.

To fill the void and keep her skills sharp, Campbell needed to find another place to play. The Potomac Patriots provided an opportunity as a member of the USPHL, the nation's largest amateur ice hockey league with over 600 teams in 24 states.

She learned about the Patriots from a

“The way hockey is changing, everyone can play the game. Her future is great. We're excited to be part of her journey.”

— JOSH GRATTON, POTOMAC PATRIOTS ELITE AND PREMIER COACH AND A FORMER NHL PLAYER

friend who took private lessons at the Prince William Ice Center and recommended she look into it.

Mutual interest took hold in July when Campbell asked whether she could attend the Patriots' invite-only Elite skills session. Josh Gratton, the head coach for both of Potomac's two junior teams, knew of Campbell through a friend of his. In need of a goalie, Potomac brought her in.

She impressed the coaching staff so much that in early August they approached Zeigler about Campbell joining the Patriots.

"It was time to think outside the box and see what she has," said Josh Gratton, a former NHL player with the Phoenix (now Arizona) Coyotes and the Philadelphia Flyers.

Upon the coaches' urging, Zeigler took a moment and watched her from his second-floor office window above the rink and agreed with his coaches' assessment.

She was technically sound, especially with the way she positioned herself. Campbell also had good reflexes and was mentally unflappable, a necessary trait for a goalie who is the last line of defense and must quickly shake off a goal and prepare for the next series.

As an 18-year-old, Campbell fell into the right age range for the Patriots, where players typically take a gap year between high school and college to develop their skills by competing for either of its two junior teams: the Elite, for ages 16

CAMPBELL » PAGE 24

Grace Campbell has posted a 1-3-2 record with a 3.67 goals-against average and an .894 save percentage so far this season.

BILL KAMENJARJ FOR INSIDENOVA



to 20, and the Premier, for ages 18 to 20.

Junior league hockey is the main feeder for players looking to advance to the next level, including college.

Both Patriot squads have diverse rosters of 20 to 25 players that are recruited from all over the world, including Romania, Russia, Canada, Sweden and the Ukraine. Players float between the two teams depending on need and performance.

While some USPHL players receive Division I interest, most at this level are recruited by Division III or the club-level American Collegiate Hockey Association programs (there is no Division II for hockey). Campbell is the only current Division I commitment among the Patriots' two junior league teams.

After watching her play, Zeigler understood the significance of adding Campbell. But for all the potential hype surrounding Campbell as a trailblazer, Zeigler wanted to offer Campbell a contract for only one reason.

"I had no interest in breaking the glass ceiling," Zeigler said in reference to Campbell becoming the league's first female player. "I am going to sign her because she's good."

#### COMING ABOARD

Zeigler and Gratton discussed the unique challenges around bringing Campbell into the program. Zeigler wanted to ensure Campbell had separate dressing and hotel rooms. He also wanted to make sure everyone informed him if Campbell dealt with any pushback or derogatory comments.

Next they broached the idea with the players. While Zeigler had final say on all personnel decisions, he wanted the players' feedback. It was unanimous.

"She's already one of us," Premier captain Trenton Hart told Zeigler.

The final conversation took place with Campbell and her parents. Zeigler outlined the plan. The Patriots wanted to sign Campbell to a contract that would bind her to the program for the upcoming 44-game regular-season that runs from September to February and beyond if the Patriots advanced to the postseason. The commitment cost Campbell \$10,900 toward travel, some team gear and food, among other items.

Although her home is just an hour away in Kensington, Md., Campbell



Grace Campbell is the only Division I commitment on either of the Potomac Patriots' junior league teams. **BILL KAMENJAR** FOR INSIDENOVA



For more than 40 additional photos of Grace Campbell playing with the Potomac Patriots, go to [INSIDENOVA.COM](https://www.insidenoVA.com)

believed the Patriots' program offered her the best opportunity to fine-tune her game while she delayed her enrollment at Boston College.

Growing up, Campbell played other sports like basketball, soccer and lacrosse, but she loved hockey the most. Her older brother, Theo, played and inspired her to pursue hockey. She also became a big fan of former Washington Capitals' goalie Braden Holtby.

"I love his style and his demeanor," Campbell said. "He's super calm. He doesn't do too much. He does things in a simple way and gets there quick."

Campbell began skating at age 3 and picked up the sport soon after playing forward first before moving to goalie. Campbell doesn't recall why she switched positions, but she knew she liked the game's action. She also coaches goalies three times a week at the St. James Sports, Wellness and Entertainment Complex in Springfield.

Preferring a quicker pace to hasten her development, Campbell usually played for boys teams, including her freshman year at Walter Johnson High School in Bethesda, Md.

Campbell's only experience with a girls

team came when she transferred her sophomore year to Shattuck-St. Mary's, a private boarding school and national power that has produced three NCAA Division I Players of the Year, including the most recent, Northeastern University goalie Aerin Frankel.

Campbell posted a 1.98 and 1.78 goals-against average for Shattuck-St. Mary's U-16 team her first two seasons and recorded a 1.37 goals-against average, eight shutouts and a .947 save percentage in 34 games her senior season with the school's prep team.

When she joined the Patriots, it was decided Campbell would practice with Potomac's Premier team for two reasons. It challenged her to raise her level of play and it would help offset traffic because the team practices in the morning and Campbell, who drives the farthest of any player, can travel from her Maryland home against rush hour.

But Campbell typically plays every other game for the USPHL's Elite Division, a 20-team league broken into four, five-team divisions that stretches from New England to Florida.

As she prepared to join the Patriots, Campbell said she was nervous at first, understandable given her new surroundings. But she quickly felt at home.

"The culture has been amazing," Campbell said. "Everyone has the same goal, which is to improve as a team and be ready to work. This is ideal for everyone to come here and develop as people and players."



Grace Campbell is taking a gap year before enrolling at Boston College next fall. **BILL KAMENJAR** FOR INSIDENOVA

To minimize any undue pressure on Campbell, Zeigler did his best to keep her under the radar for the Patriots' season-opening games Sept. 24-26 at the Wake Competition Center Black Rink near Raleigh, N.C. But word was out when he arrived and other owners asked him about the "girl on his roster."

"Once the rosters went public online, people knew," Zeigler said. "Grace isn't a unisex name."

#### MENTALLY STRONG

Besides her first name, Campbell's ponytail is the only other giveaway that she is a female hockey player.

Campbell ties her hair up only to keep it out of her face and nothing more. Campbell has worn her hair like this for many years to the point she doesn't think twice about it.

"She's so down to earth and grounded," Zeigler said. "It's why goalies are successful. She's mentally strong."

In her debut Sept. 24, Campbell gave up three goals in the first period to the Atlanta Mad Hatters, but only one after that in a 4-3 loss. Two days later, she earned the 3-2 win against Palm Beach when she stopped 25 of 27 shots.

For her efforts, Campbell was named the Week 1 Goaltender of the Week for USPHL Elite South Region's Southeast Division.

Since then, she continues to develop by keeping her team in games, while at the same time showing her game continues to evolve. In six starts, Campbell has posted a 1-3-2 record with a 3.67 goals-against average and a .894 save percentage.

"The way hockey is changing, everyone can play the game," Gratton said. "Her future is great. We're excited to be part of her journey."

## HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL

### THIS WEEK'S HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL SCHEDULE

#### FRIDAY, OCT. 29

- » Forest Park (3-5) at Colgan (0-8), 7 p.m.
- » Woodbridge (3-4) at Potomac (2-6), 7 p.m.
- » Osbourn (6-3) at Osbourn Park (2-6), 7 p.m.
- » Freedom-South Riding (3-5) at Unity Reed (3-5), 7 p.m.
- » Patriot (6-2) at John Champe (4-4), 7 p.m.
- » Brentsville (6-2) at Skyline (2-5), p.m.
- » Meridian (6-2) at Manassas Park (0-8), 7 p.m.

#### SATURDAY, OCT. 30

- » John Paul the Great (1-6) at Bishop O'Connell (4-3), noon
- » Hylton (3-5) at Freedom-Woodbridge (7-2), 2 p.m.

### TOP PERFORMANCES FROM OCT. 22

#### RUSHING

- » Keith Jenkins (Patriot) 21-272, 3 TDs vs. Freedom-South Riding
- » Jeffrey Overton Jr. (Freedom) 16-241, 2 TDs vs. Potomac
- » Jakari Lewis (Osbourn) 21-223, 4 TDs vs. John Champe
- » Bryce Jackson (Brentsville) 22-172, 2 TDs vs. Riverside
- » Nico Orlando (Brentsville) 11-148, 2 TDs vs. Riverside
- » Michael Dankwa (Woodbridge) 18-135 vs. Colgan
- » Malik Hunter (Woodbridge) 17-124, 1 TD vs. Colgan
- » Jelon Johnson (Battlefield) 9-115, 2 TDs vs. Osbourn Park

#### PASSING

- » Davis Bryson (Freedom) 11-17-0, 187, 3 TDs vs. Potomac

- » Pete Woolfrey (Potomac) 13-31-1, 181, 1 TD vs. Freedom
- » Malik Hunter (Woodbridge) 6-9-0, 157, 1 TD vs. Colgan
- » Jonathan Walters (Battlefield) 8-11-0, 152, 3 TDs vs. Osbourn Park
- » Sam Fernandez (Patriot) 10-17-0, 133 vs. Freedom-South Riding

#### RECEIVING

- » Elijah Williams (Potomac) 6-90, 1 TD vs. Freedom
- » JuJu Preston (Freedom) 5-82, 1 TD vs. Potomac
- » Kam Courtney (Freedom) 5-49 vs. Potomac
- » Gabe Bigbee (Patriot) 4-59 vs. Freedom-South Riding
- » Michael Dankwa (Woodbridge) 3-90, 1 TD vs. Colgan

# Willing and Able

## Colgan's Grace Damato honors her family tradition of putting others first

» BY DAVID FAWCETT  
dfawcett@insidenova.com

Her signature move began after accepting a bribe. Grace Damato had never taken a charge in her basketball career, but this was too good to pass up.

Colgan girls basketball coach Fred Milbert told his players he would buy a Dairy Queen Blizzard for anyone who sacrificed her body in front of an oncoming offensive player. A sophomore in her first year on varsity, Damato loved the idea of receiving a dessert treat. She was in and quickly earned her reward.

The Blizzards eventually stopped, but Grace kept absorbing charges. In one way, this was nothing new. As a soccer goalie, she was used to in-your-face contact.

But as she became an expert in anticipating an opponent's push toward the basket, taking a charge started to represent something more than snagging a prize for a job well done.

It spoke to Grace's determination. Nothing upsets Grace more than when a referee calls the foul against her. She always believes she's in position.

It spoke to Grace's inspiration. Nothing lifts her teammates more.

Most of all, though, it spoke to a family ethos that emphasizes two timeless principles: Always put others first and use your gifts to benefit the collective good.

### IMMIGRANTS FROM ITALY

Grace's great grandparents laid that foundation after emigrating in 1910 from southern Italy to Shenandoah, a one-time coal-mining town located in the central part of Pennsylvania.

When they arrived at their new home, John and Frances Damato spoke no English, had no money and went by new first names. John's given name was "Giovanni", which translates to John in English. Frances' given name was "Speranza", but officials at Ellis Island changed it to Frances because they could not understand her.

As the head of his lower middle-class family, John worked as the neighborhood handyman who ended up learning some English. With eight children to raise, Frances was a full-time mother. She never learned English and relied on others to translate for her.

They came to the United States for better opportunities and had no interest in returning to Italy. Two of Frances' sons offered to take her back to Italy for vacation, but she declined. A visit would only remind her of her tough upbringing before she came to the United States as a 19-year-old. She often said she was an



Colgan senior Grace Damato rarely scores many points in a game, but her hard-nosed play lifts the team in other ways. **INSIDENOVA FILE PHOTO**

## A legacy of sacrifice



Anthony Damato was awarded the Medal of Honor after he jumped on a grenade and saved the lives of two of his fellow soldiers inside a foxhole during a World War II battle in the Pacific Ocean.



Neil Damato died when his B17F was shot down over Germany in 1943. Neil was declared missing in action and his remains were never found.



Anthony Damato's Medal of Honor hangs inside the family room of Grace Damato's home in Manassas.



The U.S. Navy named a destroyer in honor of Anthony Damato.



A 150-foot long by 30-foot high mural of Anthony Damato in downtown Shenandoah, Pa.

ALL PHOTOS SUBMITTED

American now and wanted it to stay that way.

Instead with a focus on the future,

John and Frances Damato taught their four sons and four daughters the virtues of God, family and country through the

values of hard work and selfless devotion. It's a belief system that's passed down to each new generation.

No family member embodied self-sacrifice more than Grace's great uncles Neil and Anthony.

Neil, the oldest male and second oldest child, died in World War II when his B-17F was shot down over Germany. Neil was declared missing in action and ultimately dead November 5, 1943, according to HonorStates.org. His remains were never found. He was posthumously awarded the Purple Heart and the Air Medal.

Then on February 20, 1944, during a battle against the Japanese on the Marshall Islands, Anthony, a 21-year-old Marine corporal, dove onto an enemy grenade and died instantly to save the lives of his two fellow soldiers next to him inside a foxhole. Anthony is buried in the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu, Hawaii.

"They are part of a generation that allows [Grace] to do the things she does," said Grace's father John.

For his valor, Anthony received the Medal of Honor, the military's highest award for bravery. The framed medal and citation from President Franklin D. Roosevelt hangs in the family room of Grace's Manassas home.

A street sign in the town of Quantico, a display at the nearby National Museum of the Marine Corps and a 150-by-30-foot mural of Anthony in Shenandoah are among the other commemorations of his sacrifice.

### UNDERSTANDING SACRIFICE

An 18-year-old senior, Grace keeps those visuals of Anthony in mind to provide perspective. Take, for example, Colgan's loss last year to Western Branch in the state girls basketball quarterfinals. The Sharks were on the verge of advancing to the semifinals until Western Branch went on a 12-4 run in the final two minutes to win 72-71.

Facing the immediate reality of a promising season coming to a shocking close, Grace cried. It was a tough defeat to swallow and one that consumed Grace with thoughts of, "Why us?"

But the next day, Grace refused to dwell on what-if's or wallow in self-pity anymore. Anthony showed her how.

"It was one game," Grace said. "I'm still here. I'm still on earth. I realized others have made greater sacrifices where they've lost their lives to help others live."

Given the family history, Grace's parents emphasize to their three daughters the importance of helping wherever they can.

It's a lesson Grace's father learned as a child. When it came to assisting with chores or projects around the house

**Grace Damato is a four-sport  
standout at Colgan**

| Sport        | Years on varsity | Position   |
|--------------|------------------|--|
| Track        | 1                | Shot put (finished fourth at 2020 Cardinal District Indoor Meet) |
| Soccer       | 3                | Goalie   |
| Field hockey | 3                | Defender (second-team all-Cardinal District in 2019)             |
| Basketball   | 3                | Forward  |

**DAMATO » FROM PAGE 16**

or volunteering in the community or at church, John remembers his father constantly saying “Many hands make the load light.”

To this day, it’s an expression John uses with his own kids, even in something as seemingly insignificant as sports.

John and Grace’s mother, Rexann, never focused on who scored the most points or received the most accolades. They concentrated on filling a need. A four-sport athlete who excels at field hockey, soccer, basketball and track, Grace embraced that mindset from the start and coaches quickly noticed.

Start with the opposing Catholic Youth Organization basketball coach who once told John that if he had five players like Grace his teams would remain competitive until the end of the game.

Fast forward to high school where Colgan girls basketball coach Fred Milbert doubles that number in talking about Grace.

“I will take 10 Grace’s any day of the week,” Milbert said. “She is the epitome of sacrifice. I’ve never had a girl like her.”

Milbert loves her drive, especially when she takes a charge.

“When the play goes against her, she gets mad,” Milbert said. “She understands how to put herself in position. Against Potomac, I’m sure she had a bruised butt. She’s fun to watch.”

Grace’s teammates enjoy those moments as well. Colgan returns its top two scorers from last season in Virginia Tech commit and Class 6 state player of the year Alyssa Andrews and Queens signee Kennedy Fuller, but no one is more important to the Sharks’ chances of returning to states than Grace.

She never leads Colgan in scoring and has only reached double figures in points three times in her varsity career. But she tops the team lead in charges, something she’s turned into an art form. Anytime she prepares for impact, Grace boldly steps forth with body squared up, feet planted and hands and arms in front.

“If you don’t have the skills, you can still put forth the effort,” Grace said. “I might not be as skilled as others, but I can still help the team. I can’t make a bunch of 3-pointers, but I can take a charge.”

Her teammates tell Grace they are gunning for her title. Grace dismisses all comers with a rare boast: there’s a huge gap between her and whoever is second. Last season, she finished with a team-high 14 charges.

“She’s the most underrated player and the hardest worker,” said Fuller. “We



Grace Damato (left) will play basketball for Marymount University in Arlington.

BILL KAMENJAR | FOR INSIDENOVA



Grace Damato (right) loves cheering on her teammates.

BILL KAMENJAR | FOR INSIDENOVA

wouldn’t be where we are without her.”

Ashlee Rogers, Grace’s future basketball college coach at Marymount University, looks forward to Grace coming aboard next season. During the recruiting process, Rogers extolled Grace’s hustle so much that her comments played a big part in Grace choosing the Saints.

“What stuck with us is when [Rogers] said Grace was the first player down the court and the first one back,” John Damato said. “I appreciated her saying that. That’s what her game is all about.”

**A LASTING IMPRESSION**

One day while working at Ace Hardware on Route 234, Grace said a man entered the store and recognized her immediately as a Colgan basketball player. The attention surprised her. Why would anyone remember Grace from a basketball game where individual efforts usually stand out based on how many points someone scored?

The reason was simple. No matter where she goes, Grace makes an impression.

Her elementary-aged neighbor,

Lilly, across the street noticed. During Colgan’s run last season, Lilly and her dad watched the Sharks either in person or on YouTube. Each time, Lilly’s dad pointed out Grace’s all-out effort.

When the pandemic shut down schools in mid-March, Grace began running through the neighborhood to keep in shape. Lilly followed suit.

“I always wanted my kids to be role models,” John Damato said. “There’s no greater compliment than your neighbor complimenting your kids.”

Grace’s community-minded spirit is everywhere. She’s donated blood during the pandemic. She has cut her hair to make wigs for kids with cancer. She holds Zoom meetings with special-needs kids.

When Milbert needed one of his players to oversee the team’s participation in an adopt-a-family program for Christmas, he knew who to ask: Grace.

“She takes the lead,” Milbert said. “That’s part of her character. That’s who she is as a person. She does things to make sure others are cared for.”

She doesn’t know any other way, but



*“I will take 10 Graces any day of the week. She is the epitome of sacrifice. I’ve never had a girl like her.”*

— COLGAN HEAD GIRLS BASKETBALL COACH FRED MILBERT