

# 'Just unbelievable': How Altavista rallied around Donnie Wilkerson, who's poured his life into his community, following serious accident

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Longtime Altavista assistant cross country coach Donnie Wilkerson pauses to pose during a recent meet in Appomattox. Wilkerson returned to mentor Altavista athletes this fall despite enduring a severe biking accident in June.

Lee Luther Jr. photos, For The News & Advance

**A**LTAVISTA — Some of the pieces are missing still. Donnie Wilkerson can only recall so much.

For many of the details, he has to rely on his wife, Nancy, his faithful partner of half a century. So on a cloudy, windy afternoon in Altavista, Donnie listened as Nancy recounted all she remembers about that evening.

The two sat near each other inside their home on Shady Lane, Nancy on the couch and Donnie in a recliner, as they revisited the story. Ever steady, as she was that night, Nancy offers her perspective of June 21.

Most of the words that come spilling out of her mouth are colored by gratitude. A handful in her accounting of that Tuesday, though, are tinged with heartache.

They were the words she said to her daughter, Abby Eubank, that evening. At about 7 o'clock, with dinner ready for her and Donnie to enjoy together, Nancy picked up the phone to request help from Eubank, who lives just up the road from her parents, and to deliver serious news.

"Your daddy," Nancy said of Donnie, "didn't come home."

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**Donnie Wilkerson might be better known** as Mr. Altavista, the name he's actually been called on several occasions.

Altavista always has and will be Donnie's home. He grew up here, his star status cemented in town well before this summer's harrowing tale unfolded.

Donnie, now 71, was a basketball, football and track star in his heyday. He was runner-up in the pole vault in a state track meet. Quarterback of an undefeated football squad in the late '60s.

Take away those accomplishments, though, and there are plenty of other reasons why those in Altavista know the name Donnie Wilkerson.

For more than 25 years (a stint at the now-defunct Lane Company split his tenure in two), he taught students in Campbell County, only retiring after the conclusion of the 2021-22 school year. Hundreds of kids — such as the student from the 1970s Donnie recently saw dropping off his granddaughter at the Campbell County Technical Center, where Donnie last worked — have passed through his classrooms.

Not all of those teenagers liked Donnie, he said, but he never minded that. He loved the kids too much to let it get to him.

"Some people dread going to work. I never dreaded going to work. I loved getting up every day," Donnie said. "The kids would offer something different every day. And then in the afternoon, I would get to decompress a little bit with cross country or whatever sport I was involved with. It was perfect."

He previously coached football and basketball at his alma mater, getting involved in high school sports when his two daughters, Abby and Ashley (now Ashley Moore), started on their athletic journeys. Eventually, he ended up coaching cross country, a sport he's helped lead for 20-plus years. He currently serves as an assistant under Darryl Smith, a man Donnie has described as being like a son.

Cross country, Donnie explained, gives him a chance to both mentor teenagers — a job he's always loved and wanted to do, and knew he needed to continue doing despite retiring from teaching — and indulge his own love of running.

"When I graduated from high school, I knew I wanted to be a teacher and wanted to be a coach," he said. "I had some really influential coaches in my high school career that mentored me. As a kid, you're learning so much from these coaches, and I just said, 'I want to help kids like they helped me.'"

With cross country, the coaches are "immersed" as they teach the sport. When he coached football, for example, Donnie couldn't put on pads and run through contact drills like the kids did during practices. But in cross country, he's able to run with them — although running has given way to Donnie biking alongside the athletes as they practice, he explained, because of an injury a couple years ago in which the muscle in his quad tore away from the bone.

Biking during practice is perfectly fine with Donnie, too, though. He's loved doing that since he was a boy.

"I tell people, 'The hour, hour and a half, two hours, whatever it is that I'm on that bike, I'm that 10-year-old kid that doesn't have a worry in the world,'" he said.

Donnie's hours on his bike extend beyond cross country practice, too. He likes to go on 25-mile rides through and around town regularly. Many of those paths include smaller hills or even steep inclines — all the more exciting, in Donnie's opinion.

"I like the thrill of speed a little bit," Donnie said. A few seconds later, he added the operative phrase pertaining to June 21.

"And I'm OK with that if I can stop."

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**Donnie knows his bikes** well. The one he's used more often of late, his mountain bike, was due for a safety repair.

By mid-June, or so, Donnie said he knew the brakes were in bad condition. Even if he didn't say that out loud to Nancy.

Of course, she didn't need him to say it. She'd observed and heard things becoming somewhat dangerous already. There were a few times when Donnie came down their sloped driveway and barely came to a halt before crashing into one of the cars at the bottom. Nancy heard the squealing that accompanied Donnie clamping down on the brakes to avoid collisions.

So sometime after 2 p.m. June 21, Donnie rode his bike up the road to a local shop to get the appropriate parts ordered. Donnie was on his way out when Nancy passed him coming home.

She asked why he didn't load the bike in one of the cars. Thinking "enough" of the brake pads remained for another couple rides, and knowing he "couldn't sit still" that afternoon, he figured a ride up the road was acceptable.

"I just wanted one more ride," Donnie said, "and the weather was nice."

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**It was around 7 p.m.** when Nancy decided she needed to call her daughter.

The hours of 4 p.m., 5 p.m. and 6 p.m. had passed without Donnie coming home, but Nancy hadn't been too worried at those points.

She didn't have a way to contact Donnie, because the cellphone she'd just bought him was laying on the counter at home. So around 4, she drove to the bike shop and heard Donnie had long since left. Nancy knew Donnie had committed to help Smith with something related to track at the high school, though, and didn't know how long he'd be gone. Surely he'd be home after a couple hours, she thought, so she set about preparing dinner.

That task complete, she turned her attention back to her husband, and then to the phone call.

"I just didn't know what to think," Nancy said.

Abby Eubank and her husband, Jeremy, immediately began working to locate Donnie. Jeremy went to the place that's practically a second home for Donnie, the school, and found Smith, the Altavista head cross country coach. He asked whether Smith had seen Donnie.

Smith hadn't.

Donnie “had literally just retired,” Smith said, so when Donnie didn’t show up as he’d committed to, Smith didn’t “want to make him feel like he needed to be at our beck and call.” Smith figured Donnie had been delayed by something or perhaps forgotten a prior commitment.

But when Jeremy Eubank showed up, Smith said, “That’s when I really knew, this is not good.”

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**Smith, along with Donnie and Nancy’s children,** quickly began searching for Donnie by driving around town. Smith, who calls Donnie his “best friend,” knew well the routes Donnie often biked, so he started a list in his head of where Donnie might’ve ended up.

The group couldn’t find him, though.

Nancy decided then it was time to report Donnie missing to authorities.

Officers from the Altavista Police Department responded, as did those from the Campbell County Sheriff’s Office, along with search and rescue crews.

“Officers came in off duty,” Altavista PD Chief Tommy Merricks said of his crew.

Others came too, turning out in droves after seeing the news through Facebook posts that were shared close to 900 times and garnered hundreds of comments.

Citizens of Campbell County, those who knew Donnie from his work as a teacher. Residents of this small town, those who’d seen him biking around the sidewalks or volunteering as part of the chain gang for Friday night football games. Members of his cross country team, those who’d learned from Donnie what it means to be good to everyone you encounter.

“Within 30 minutes, the school parking lot was full of people,” Nancy said.

“Everybody. I mean the whole town was in the parking lot.”

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**“I probably violated every rule** of search and rescue,” Merricks said. In any other circumstance, law enforcement wouldn’t think of using untrained individuals to aid in such an endeavor.

But Merricks wasn’t going to let the extra resources go to waste.

“The longer time went on,” Merricks said, “the [higher the] chances that you won’t find him.”

So he and other professionals came up with plans for who could cover what areas of the town in the search.

Cross country runners and their parents looked up and down Bedford Avenue for signs of the coach. Others went down the old Lane Company road.

Smith, with his understanding of Donnie’s habits, was paired up with Stuart Herndon, a Campbell County Sheriff’s Office investigator, as the search continued. All the while, thoughts about Donnie being in danger grew louder in Smith’s head.

“It went from being concerned to worried, really worried to fearful,” Smith said.

“Why,” he thought, “hasn’t somebody found him?”

Between 10:30 p.m. and 11 p.m. or so, Smith found his answer.

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**Herndon spotted a light** from Donnie's bike in the distance.

He and Smith had searched English Park, one of Donnie's regular stomping grounds, and continued along some of the area's back pathways that led to a more residential area of town. Donnie's home was on the other end of one of those "overgrown easements," as Smith described it.

The two ran toward the light and spotted Donnie, who was lying in an area only a few hundred yards from his property. Donnie, it turned out, had missed his driveway and gone down the longer incline of his neighbor's driveway.

Knowing his bike lacked proper brakes, and after surveying the landscape later, Donnie's family and friends believe he hit some type of impediment, causing him to go airborne, in a separate direction from the bike.

Donnie likely landed on his chest as he came to a rest. There, for between 7½ and 8 hours, he stayed.

Until he heard something.

"We found him."

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**"Had it been another hour ..."** Donnie said, trailing off as he remembered some of the statements search and rescue crews and law enforcement told him well after the fact.

"... He wouldn't have made it," Nancy finished.

On first glance, Smith believed Donnie would be OK. Smith believed Donnie's head was fine because of how they found him with his helmet, and he didn't see any blood or other particularly gruesome injuries.

He knew Donnie had been badly hurt, bruised and cut up after going through foliage and sailing through the air.

Donnie broke multiple ribs, cracked his sternum and ended up with a hernia.

The more serious issues, though, lie beneath the surface. Both of Donnie's lungs collapsed because of the impact, forcing him to be airlifted to a hospital in Roanoke for immediate attention, including the first of several surgeries.

After a week, which included moments of excruciating pain, Donnie was transferred to Virginia Baptist Hospital, where he embarked on another week of grueling recovery and physical therapy.

When Smith saw Donnie, he said, Donnie truthfully looked a lot worse than he'd expected. Smith had seen Donnie push through the severe leg injury before, as well as a broken collarbone in the past, after all.

"Even when he's been at his weakest," Smith said, "he still looked like a strong person."

Despite all he'd been through this time around, Donnie was convinced he would prove that was still true.

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**When it comes to cross country** — a sport in which there's no scoreboard, no opponent guarding you and only open landscape ahead — mental toughness is a necessity. In two-plus decades coaching those runners in Altavista, Donnie has tried to instill all the skills necessary to keep going when the hardest part of the course is ahead.

Cross country, Donnie added, is about “how tough you can be and then what your attitude is.”

In the late June and early July days of this past summer, circumstances asked Donnie those same questions, though his answers played out in a different venue.

There were days when pain management, as he went through physical therapy, proved especially difficult. Makes sense, given the extent of his injuries and how hard it was to even catch his breath after both of his lungs collapsed during the accident.

But Donnie kept going, using as particular motivation the date he saw written in his room at Virginia Baptist one day.

July 14. It was the tentative date of discharge, he explained. He wasn't about to be teased, though, so he worked to check off every box in PT and build up his stamina so he could return to life as normal.

“It was never a question,” Donnie said when asked whether he'd intended to get back to coaching cross country in the fall. “I'd be there in whatever capacity I could to help out.”

Donnie was at the high school for Day 1 of practice, a testament also to his commitment to work on his own after getting discharged.

“I think the kids every day are inspired by him,” Smith said of the members of the Colonels team.

In the days after getting home, he walked up and down the driveway and got back in the pool (another place he loves to work out), initially swimming 20 laps a day and then working his way up to where he is now, 50 laps.

“I knew for me to be who I am,” said Donnie, who ran in the Virginia 10 Miler for years and also has participated in multiple other races and triathlons, “I have to find a way. If it's in the pool, if it's on the bike, if it's walking, I've got to have that.”

Which is also why, when the weather gets warmer again, he intends to get back on the bike he rode June 21.

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**Donnie hopes also** to visit the spot where he landed during his accident, accompanied perhaps by Smith, who can fill in the pieces that still are missing from the eight hours or so Donnie lay alone and unconscious.

“It's a curiosity,” Donnie said. “It won't change anything. I know that.”

A visit won't change the idea in Donnie and Nancy's minds that, had he perhaps gone down his own driveway that afternoon, there could have been a much more severe outcome, given the details of their property.

“I don’t think I made that decision,” Donnie said of how he ended up traveling a unique path that night, harkening back to his faith in believing God protected him from death.

Seeing where he landed also won’t change what else happened that evening — that hundreds of people who knew Donnie shared concerns online, and hundreds more dropped their plans and showed up to find the man who’d given them so much of himself.

“The response that night, in my opinion, was a testament to the community of Altavista and a testament to what a good man Donnie is,” said Merricks, the Altavista police chief, who added in his 30-plus years in law enforcement, he’s “never seen a response from that many people” in similar types of searches.

In Altavista, Merricks said, “everybody comes together to support the Colonels,” and Donnie, of course, is part of the school community around which Altavista rallies.

That’s why Smith “couldn’t possibly tell you” how many people have stopped him to ask how Donnie was. It still happens to this day, the head cross country coach said.

More evidence of that backing for Mr. Altavista lives inside the Wilkersons’ Shady Lane home, this of the physical type. In two stacks held together by binder rings, more than 100 cards have been preserved. Each sent in the days that followed the accident offers well wishes and tells how glad those in Altavista were upon learning Donnie was found.

Donnie, sitting nearby while Nancy pulls out the cards she worked to keep, does everything he can to hold in the emotions when asked about the support offered over the last 3½ months.

“It was just unbelievable,” he said.

He could’ve been referring to the incident itself. That he’d tried to remedy the issue with the brakes on his bike, but that the preventative measure had come a little too late. Or that he’d ended up just a few hundred yards from his property. But Donnie wasn’t. The emotions he carries regarding June 21 don’t include disbelief or anger.

The only accurate word is gratitude. Gratitude for the people in the town he loves, the one he’s only ever called home.