

Cardinal Athletics

COACHING *in the Community*

By Lisa Carroll

In 1990, Joe Fisher, B.A. 1975, knocked on approximately 300 doors in a low-income housing community in Laurel, Md. His message was simple and direct.

“I am here to help your kids get into college,” he told those who answered the door. Many were skeptical.

“They thought I was a minister or they wouldn’t answer the door,” Fisher says. “Some people told me their kids weren’t ready yet for college. I told them, ‘That’s okay, I’ll be back.’”

Twenty-five years later, his determination has paid off. Fisher, who is the head women’s cross country and track and field coach at Catholic University, is celebrating a milestone with his nonprofit organization First Generation College Bound. With his help, more than 2,000 low- to moderate-income students from Prince George’s County, Md., have gone to college. More than 500 have graduated and over 600 are currently enrolled.

In recognition of his work with First Generation College Bound, Fisher was presented with the Smathers Award during Athletics’ annual Golf Classic on Oct. 23. The award honors a former or current CUA student-athlete who has distinguished themselves in service to their community, university, profession, or country.

Fisher understands the students he mentors. Growing up in a housing project in Southeast Washington, Fisher says he originally hated school and never considered college as an option. His mother and father just wanted their eight children to complete high school, something his parents never did. (His mother did complete her GED at the age of 52.) It wasn’t until he started running track that he realized his athleticism could pave the way to a spot on a college track team.

Fisher’s high school track coach, Hubert Gates, introduced him to Jerry McGee, Catholic University’s track and field head coach.



“When I came to visit Catholic University, met the team, and saw the campus, I was like, ‘Wow!’” Fisher recalls. “I wanted to come here. Catholic University felt like home.”

Fisher was able to enroll at Catholic University with the help of the Partnership Program, a minority scholarship program founded by Thaddeus Aubry and Leon LeBuffe that began in 1969 to benefit promising young students from the Washington, D.C., area. Fisher was one of 30 students to attend Catholic University. The Partnership Program provided academic support and student services to those enrolled in the program.

“If it wasn’t for the Partnership Program, I wouldn’t have been given the opportunity to go to Catholic University,” Fisher says. “I’ll be indebted to CUA the rest of my life.”

As a student-athlete at CUA, Fisher excelled. He was an NCAA All-American in 1973 and 1975 and he earned his bachelor’s degree in education in 1975. He went on to earn a master’s degree in urban education from Morgan State University.

After graduation, he became a middle school teacher in Howard County, Md. There he saw a need he thought he could fill based on his own life experiences.

“I learned there wasn’t a long-term commitment in the public school system to really help low-income students go to college,” he explains. “Low-income kids wanted to go to college. It was just that they lacked the encouragement and resources to find out how they could go to college.”

Fisher’s help comes in multiple ways. First of all, he says he focuses on what he calls “attitude management.” He wants to make sure the students in his program have a mindset that college is an opportunity that is open to them if they work for it.

“I wanted to find a way to plant that seed for education in their minds,” he says. “Now, when I walk into the community, everyone knows Mr. Fisher is all about education. Whenever I go, people know we’re going to talk about education.”

Students who have completed his program have gone on to become dentists, ministers, business leaders, lawyers, and a state delegate.

When the program started, Fisher ran it

out of his house. Today, thanks to donations and grants, Fisher and his small staff run First Generation College Bound out of an office in Laurel and operate in five high schools in Prince George’s County. The program targets low- to moderate-income students whose parents did not attend college and provides them with guidance on when to take standardized tests, how to apply for college and financial aid, and how to prepare for college once they’re accepted.

First Generation College Bound also runs a homework club in Kimberly Gardens, a low-income housing complex in Prince George’s County that is open to students in grades 1 through 12. The program is staffed by certified teachers who provide homework assistance and other academic support.

More recently, First Generation College Bound has partnered with the University System of Maryland’s Way2GoMaryland campaign to help more underrepresented students excel. As part of this partnership, First Generation College Bound works with three middle schools in Prince George’s County to inspire students and their families to begin planning for college at an early stage.

Fisher, who has coached CUA’s women’s cross country and track and field teams for 36 years, says there are parallels between coaching athletes and coaching students to get into college.

“You’re always problem solving,” he says. “You’re trying to keep kids on track to achieve their goals. You’re trying to manage attitudes to stay the course. It’s definitely coaching in both senses. I feel ongoing encouragement and support is needed in high school and in college for students to achieve their goals.”

After 25 years of helping kids plan for college, Fisher says it’s only now that the emotional aspect of his work has caught up to him.

“I knew I had to stay the course and stay focused on the goal,” he says. “Now it’s really starting to hit me. Everything is coming full circle from what I started 25 years ago. I just got word that a student I’ve worked with since first grade in the homework club has matriculated into college. To see these kids finish college, get jobs, and achieve their goals is exciting and wonderful.”

SPORT SHORTS

Football Team to Join NEWMAC in 2017

Starting in 2017, the Cardinals football team will join the New England Women’s & Men’s Athletic Conference (NEWMAC) and become the eighth school in its newly formed football conference. Catholic University President John Garvey and Associate Vice President and Director of Athletics Sean Sullivan announced Sept. 29 that CUA will join the United States Coast Guard Academy, Maine Maritime Academy, the United States Merchant Marine Academy, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Norwich University, Springfield College, and Worcester Polytechnic Institute in the new league. CUA has competed in the Old Dominion Athletic Conference since 1999 and will end its 18-year stint in the league following the 2016 season.

Tennis Courts Named for Dowd Family

On Oct. 3, the CUA tennis courts were named in honor of longtime athletic staff members Jone and Martin Dowd, B.A. 1960. The Dowds have been associated with CUA for more than 50 years. Jone initiated the first athletic programs for women during the rise of Title IX. She began and coached many of CUA’s teams, including women’s basketball and tennis. Marty retired in spring 2015 after 53 years as coach of the men’s tennis program.

