Celebrating Jamie

When the Catholic University women’s basketball team took to the court on the evening of Nov. 17, they were surrounded by orange balloons and streamers. Orange isn’t one of the University’s athletic colors, but it was Jamie Roberts’s favorite color. And this night was a celebration of Jamie.

Five months earlier, on June 13, 2014, Roberts — who was known for her kindness, humor, and sense of adventure — was killed in an accident in Kentucky while riding her bike across country in support of the Ulman Cancer Fund. Roberts was a staff member in the Department of Athletics, an assistant coach for the women’s basketball team, a Cardinal Athletics family member, and a woman everyone looked up to.

The death of Roberts — who was known as “One Bird Family” — was a natural thing for us to reach out to her parents, Allison Stevens, a senior field hockey player and co-president of CUA’s SAAC, attended the 2015 NCAA Convention held Jan. 15 to 18 in Washington, D.C. As a member of the national Division III SAAC, she attended meetings to discuss initiatives and issues affecting student-athletes in Division III. She had the chance to voice an opinion on a variety of proposals, including adding a gender championship sport and reducing the number of competitions by 10 percent in every sport.

“Every student athlete has the ability to make a difference. Whether that difference is on the field, in the classroom, or in the community, the possibilities are endless,” Stevens said. — A.G.

The death of Roberts — who was known for her kindness, humor, and sense of adventure — was devastating for the athletic department. Coaches, staff, and student-athletes wanted to find a way to pay tribute to a woman who had touched so many of them.

Roberts was a three-sport athlete at St. Mary’s College in St. Mary’s City, Md., which she graduated from in 2011. Coaches and staff of the two schools’ athletic departments thought it would be fitting for Catholic University and St. Mary’s to join forces in remembering Roberts, and came up with a plan to play each other in the three sports she had played: soccer, basketball, and lacrosse.

The first game in her honor was on the St. Mary’s soccer field on Sept. 10. Both teams gathered on the field to remember Roberts and to have a photo taken in their “One Bird Family” T-shirts, a nod to the schools’ nicknames, the Cardinals and the Seahawks. That game ended in a perhaps fitting 0-0 tie.

The women’s basketball game on Nov. 17 was the second game of CUA’s season. On that night, players from Catholic University and St. Mary’s met at center court of the Raymond A. DuFour Athletic Center for a pre-game ceremony. They wore their orange “One Bird Family” T-shirts and CUA players wrote Roberts’s initials on their shoes. A special game jersey — half Catholic University, half St. Mary’s — was presented to Roberts’s parents.

The temperature on the evening of Jan. 31 was 27 degrees; the wind chill made it feel like 13. CUA student-athletes, coaches, and staff of the Department of Athletics marched up to Cardinal Stadium to an icy tank of water. Some of them wore their team uniforms while others wore costumes, but all of them took the plunge. By themselves or in groups, the student-athletes walked off a plank covered in ice and jumped into the water.

An announcer and cheering supporters gave the event the feel of an athletic competition, but in fact, these brave members of the athletics department were taking part in the Polar Plunge, which raises money for Special Olympics D.C. Each participant had to come up with a minimum of $50 in donations for the charity. This year, over 200 student-athletes raised more than $11,000 for Special Olympics D.C.

The Polar Plunge is one of the signature annual events of Catholic University’s Student-Athlete Advisory Council (SAAC), a committee that provides student-athletes a voice within the University and, specifically, the Department of Athletics. CUA’s SAAC is a local version of the national SAAC, that the NCAA assembled in 1998 to receive student-athlete input from its member institutions. The NCAA mandates that all member institutions have local SAACs on their campuses.

At CUA, student-athletes from every sport come together every month to act as ambassadors for their respective sports and to discuss what they can do to represent the University in a positive way in the community.

CUA’s SAAC also has been involved in NCAA’s legislative work at the national, regional, and conference level. Allison Stevens, a senior field hockey player and co-president of CUA’s SAAC, attended the 2015 NCAA Convention held Jan. 15 to 18 in Washington, D.C. As a member of the national Division III SAAC, she attended meetings to discuss initiatives and issues affecting student-athletes in Division III. She had the chance to voice an opinion on a variety of proposals, including adding women’s sand volleyball as a national collegiate championship sport and reducing the number of competitions by 10 percent in every sport.

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Students Play Advisory Role in Athletics

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“When we [the team] talked before the game, I tried to focus on a conversation I’d had with Jamie’s parents the month after her passing,” CUA Head Coach Matt Donohue explains. “They’ve always referred to any event surrounding Jamie after her passing as a celebration of her life. Our conversation as a team was about how we would go out there to celebrate her and what she meant to us.”

Junior guard Jayni Webster said Roberts used to help her work on her layups after practice.

“She was my coach, but we had the same sense of humor. Our relationship was more than player-coach,” she explains. “We had a friendship. She was the life in the room. Everyone looked up to her.”

Before the game, “we had tears in our eyes,” Webster says. “I was a little nervous about being that emotional before a game, but we had to play for Jamie.”

CUA won the game 66 to 47.

“It was one of the toughest games I’ve ever been a part of, but I’m so proud and happy to have been a part of it,” says Donohue. “There’s been a lot of discussion among our young women this season about winning for Jamie. Quite a few of them have talked about her watching from above and about how proud she would be of how we’ve played. It’s helped them heal.”

“The One Bird initiative is truly an appropriate tribute to this amazing young woman,” adds St. Mary’s Athletic Director Scott Devine. “I have known CUA Athletic Director Sue Devine. ‘I have known CUA Athletic Director Sue Devine for many years, so it was a natural thing for us to reach out to each other. I know there are many people at both schools who miss her each day and this has been a way to help all of us cope with Jamie’s death.’

In addition to the game against St. Mary’s, the women’s basketball team hosted the Jamie Lynn Roberts-Fairfield Inn Holiday Tournament in December. CUA won the tournament in two closely contested games. Even after the spring lacrosse matchup, the tributes to Roberts will continue.

“We want to keep celebrating her, not just this year, but every year,” Donohue says. — L.C.