

THE VOLLEYBALL COACH

By John F. Hall

This is one of my longer Stories. If you read it in the morning, it goes best with a hot cup of coffee. If you wait to read it in the afternoon, it goes best with a drink of your choice. My story begins one Fall, September evening in 2017, and it ends one August evening in 2023. The two things, that tie this story together, is the fact that I had a meeting on both of those evenings. On September 14, 2017, the Heritage Christian Academy (HCA) volleyball Coach, Eldridge Rogers decided to have "Grandparents Night." The HCA volleyball players, were requested to bring their grandparents onto the gym floor, and to introduce them to those in the bleachers. Junior varsity player, Lexie Crisp has no grandfather in her life. I was filling that role since her dad, Captain Jason Crisp, was deployed to Iraq. Lexie told me that I filled that role, perfectly.



When Coach Rogers called for the junior varsity volleyball players to come onto the gym floor, with their grandparents, I came with Lexie. She was handed a microphone by another player. She said: "Hi! I'm Lexie Crisp. This is my grandfather, John Hall. And I call him An-Father." She then handed the microphone to Coach Rogers.

I was also filling the role of surrogate grandfather to Lexie's older sister, and varsity player, Skyler Crisp. I had to leave before Coach Rogers called the varsity players to come unto the gym floor with their grandparents. Coach Rogers explained to those in the bleachers, that I was called away for a meeting, and that I was Skyler's grandfather. Before leaving HCA to attend the meeting, I was listening to Coach Rodgers, as he was coaching the varsity volleyball players. He put one finger to his forehead and told the players: "Volleyball is a mind game. You must anticipate what the opposing player is going to do." He kept his finger, touching his forehead, to emphasize his coaching point. I always keep my cellphone with me, and I took Coach Roger's picture. I believe that he was one of the best, if not the best, high school and volleyball coach in Kentucky.



In August of 2023, Skyler and Lexie invited me to come to the Heritage Christian Academy Alumni volleyball games. Just as in 2017, I had a scheduled meeting with my Christian Fraternity Brothers that evening. I could only watch the alumni playing against the regular HCA volleyball players for about 50 minutes. Before I left the HCA gym, I had a picture taken with fellow volleyball referees, Chuck Standiford and Scott Colley. I had officiated, as a referee, with them for two years. I officiated Christian, private and public school volleyball games. The HCA gym was given a new wooden floor. Painted on the floor, in front of where our picture was taken, is the wording, "Eldridge Rogers Court." On one side of the gym walls, is a large painted volleyball with the words, "In

Honor of Coach Rogers.” He was a former HCA volleyball coach. He also trained me to be a volleyball referee. I always admired Coach Rogers.

Today, Lexie and her sister, Skyler both work. They are students at Murray State University (MSU). That college is my alma mater. I am a “Racer” fan of the college’s volleyball sports. The college mascot is a thoroughbred horse. My fellow Christian Fraternity Brother and fellow volleyball referee, Richard Hornbeat calls me “the intrepid weaver of stories.”

Benjamin Malacia Franklin wrote a poem called, “Just A weaver.” These are his words: “My life is but a weaving between my Lord and me; I cannot choose the colors He worketh steadily. Oft times He waveth sorrow and I, in foolish pride, forgets He sees the upper, and I the under side. Not til the loom is silent and the shuttles cease to fly, shall God unroll the canvas and explain the reason why. The dark threads are as needful in the Weaver’s skillful hand, as the threads of gold and silver in the pattern He has planned. He knows, He loves, He cares, nothing this truth can dim. He gives His very best to those who choose to walk with Him.”

As an undergraduate student at MSU, I worked on campus in the college’s post office. I had experience working as a Postal Assistant, at the Fort Campbell Post Office, when I was a freshman at the Hopkinsville Community College (HCC), from 1966 to 1968. The MSU Postmaster, Hal Kingins hired me when I transferred to Murray State in 1968. I also worked during school registration. It’s hard to realize that those were paper and pencil days, when students signed up for classes, without computers.

I remember a college song that we would sing. It was written by B. Austin, Dean of Men, in 1935. These are his lyrics: “In the heart of Jackson’s Purchase, ‘neath the sun’s warm glow; is the home of Murray College, finest place we know. May we cherish thy traditions, hold thy banners high, ever guard thy name in glory, live to do or die. Tho we leave thy walls forever, many miles go hence, may our love for Murray College only have commenced.”

I volunteered in HCA’s lunchroom, for ten years, when my grandchildren, Andrea, Heather, and John-John were students there. The staff, the students, and the teachers, all called me, “An-Father.” It’s what my oldest granddaughter, Andrea stated calling me, when she was a few years old. Andrea played volleyball at HCA, and Heather was a HCA cheerleader. They transferred to Trigg County Schools when Andrea was in the 9th grade. After over a year at HCC, they transferred to Western Kentucky University (WKU). They graduated from that Bowling Green, Kentucky college.

At the HCA Alumni volleyball games, I was sitting next to Kendall Lancaster, Skyler’s husband. They have been married, if my memory serves me correctly, for about a year. Kendall works at the Walmart Distribution Center, north of Oak Grove, Kentucky. Skyler works at the Walmart main store in Hopkinsville. My grandson, John- John also works there. Lexie Crisp works at TJ Max in Hopkinsville. When I came onto the HCA gym, I went over to the bleachers, opened up my folding chair, and sat down, on the forth row.

Skyler, Lexie, and Allie Maternoski, also an alumni player, came over to the bleachers to see me. I had some assistance getting down to the gym floor. I put my hand on the shoulder of an elderly man, who was sitting on the front row. I said to the man: "I hope you don't mind, I'm 78, and I just need some support getting down." The man smiled at me and said: "I know how you feel, I'm 78 too."

I gave Skyler, Allie, and Lexie a hug. I asked Kendall to take a group picture with my cellphone.

I went back up into the bleachers and sat down. I no sooner settled into my portable seat, when Isabella Mauldin saw me. Her late grandfather, Raymond Martin, is a friend and fellow Vietnam War Veteran. Isabella goes to the same church that I attend. She came up to where I was sitting, and gave me a hug. She asked me a question, and answered it at the same time. She asked: "Why are you here? Oh, I know, it's the Crisp girls." Isabella is also an HCA Alumni volleyball player, and a graduate of Murray State. She pointed out her boyfriend on the gym floor. I asked him to take a picture of Isabella and me. She went back to practice, and he came and sat down next to me.

He told me that his first name is Thomas. He is what is called a traveling physical therapist. He goes to various hospitals in Kentucky and Tennessee, to work where he is needed. Thomas mentioned that he is from North Carolina, and that his parents are retired military. He played volleyball in school and they retired his shirt number, so he might have been an outstanding player. The time was running short, so I moved down to the first row of bleachers, to get a few more pictures.

I like to weave in more than one story, within another story. My other surrogate granddaughter, is Jade Barkman. She sat next to me, for almost 14 years at church. Her godmother, Trish Cunningham brought her to church when Jade was still a baby. Trish sang in the church choir. I would join them when my job as an usher allowed. Jade was not a volleyball player. She moved with her parents to Russellville, Kentucky, five or six years ago. She was in the Russellville High School Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC). It's a high school elective program whose mission is to teach students citizenship, leadership, character, and community service. I get to see Jade once or twice a year. She is a freshman at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, Kentucky. She has a job on campus. Trish and Jade call me Mr. John.

In mentoring young adults, I like to use several things, to include a poem about life's lessons. Nnadozie Okoro wrote a poem called, "Life Passage." These are his words: "Life is full of lessons, lessons not much designed by professors of college. Yet each time we went through those lessons, no matter how hard it was, it was through passage. We renew ourselves from every pain. From every depression comes wisdom, and with every down fall comes a new root to grow higher and higher. But what matters the most is having the courage to move on not fearing what the past have said or will be saying. Those ancient thoughts we tend to hang on and finding the courage beneath the dust. To dream anew, anew beginning even when the heavens have not broken down. For life is full of lessons that form a masterpiece once the sunset of life arrives in glory, with endless stories to

bring forth laughter, pride and tears, especially those deemed to be hell through passage. Yet what really matters is the ability to form a bond with those lessons to draw from it. Passing it to younger generations to give forth witness, that lesson is life. For every success comes a lesson, not just failures, and those lessons are life, for life won't be life without those lessons." As a lay Christian writer, of nonfiction life stories, I do so like to weave in lyrics to Christian hymns. I believe that it is by Christ's grace, that I am able to write.

Okoro makes some good points in his poem about life passages. But everyone goes through predictable life passages, from childhood, to becoming an adult, then middle age, until they reach old age. Like the grains of sand in my hourglass, on my chess, our heartbeats are numbered. I like to kid, and say that I am too young at heart, to be this old. I have said it, over and over again, that without Christ's inspiration, there is no way that I can weave my stories, that are enjoyed by my young, and older readers.

And to share exactly how I feel about Jesus Christ, I will use a hymn written by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend called, "In Christ Alone." These are their lyrics: "In Christ alone, my hope is found. He is my light, my strength, my song. This Cornerstone, this solid ground, firm through the fiercest drought and storm. What heights of love, what depths of peace, when fears are stilled, when strivings cease. My Comforter, my All in All. Here in the love of Christ I stand. In Christ alone, who took on flesh, fullness of God in helpless babe. This gift of love and righteousness scorned by the ones He came to save. Til on the cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied. For every sin on Him was laid, here in the death of Christ I live, I live. There in the ground His body lay, Light of the world by darkness slain. Then bursting forth in glorious Day, up from the grave He rose again. And as He stands in victory, sin's curse has lost its grip on me. For I am His and He is mine, brought by with the precious blood of Christ. No guilt in life, no fear in death, this is the power of Christ in me. From life's first cry to final breath, Jesus commands my destiny. No power of hell, no scheme of man, can ever pluck me from His hand. Till he returns or calls me home, here in the power of Christ I'll stand."

In this story, several people took some pictures for me. In one picture, taken years ago, in the HCA gym, one person captured one of my Christian Fraternity Brothers, Chuck Spurr. He was sitting four rows above me. In March of 2023, I was fighting for my life, at Baptist Health Hospital in Paducah, Kentucky. Chuck came by to visit and to cheer me up. That's what friends are for.

As I bring this story to a close, there is one thing that I felt Coach Rogers knew. He had the intuitive conviction, that it matter to Skyler and Lexie, that I cared enough to come and to be there for them. Just as I have tried to be there for Jade. And I think that Isabella feels the same way. I am also, very grateful, to be able to touch the lives of so many people, both young and old, with my stories. Coach Eldridge Rogers was a great coach, because his volleyball players loved and respected him.

John F. Hall

*Read other stories by John F. Hall and others at:
<http://www.ajlambert.com>