



MY FORTUITOUS ENCOUNTERS

A Law & People Who Listened

—BOBBETTE BROWN-VANDENBERG

My career in educational and athletic settings has spanned over four decades. I believe my vocational calling was serendipitously sparked and subsequently nurtured through many fortuitous encounters over a lifetime. Coined by Mr. D. J. De Pree in the 1920's, fortuitous encounters are “evidence of the hand of God” (Davis & Spears, 2013, p. xiii) in our lives. Davis and Spears (2013) further described these encounters as “moments where a person, place, or thing causes our lives to change in a more positive direction” (p. 1). In this essay, I will describe persons, a place, and legislation (a thing) that affected my life path, and progressively moved me toward a servant-leadership ethic in my work. Focusing on four people who listened at pivotal times in my life, a thing (a law) that “listened” to the times, and my place of employment where a servant-leadership culture was encouraged, I reflect how the trajectory of my life was changed in a very positive way by these encounters.

SERVANT-LEADER LISTENING

Listening was a major theme in the work of Robert Greenleaf (1977). In his seminal essay, *The Servant as Leader*, he writes, “true listening builds strength in other people” (p. 31). Beginning in 1990, Larry Spears spent considerable time and effort reading Greenleaf’s work and extracting “ideas and themes running throughout Greenleaf’s writings”



(Ferch & Tormey, 2015, p. 79). Listening was not only included in Spears' list of the top ten servant-leadership characteristics, "he found listening was the most foundational and most mentioned of all the characteristics" (Ferch, 2012, p. 130). Burley-Allen (1995) explains different levels of listening create varying degrees of "understanding, retention, and effective communication" (p. 13) between speaker and listener. She emphasizes Level 1 (empathetic) listening allows us to be most present to the speaker as it "encourages honesty, understanding, and a feeling of security" (p. 6). In a nutshell, Level 1 listening includes being in a state of non-judgement, and awareness of the other through attentiveness both to words and body language. She concludes, "the overall focus is to listen from the heart, which opens the doorway to understanding, caring, and empathy" (p. 14). Greenleaf (1977) asks, "are we listening to the one with whom we want to communicate? Is our basic attitude...one of wanting to understand?" (p. 31). Because Spears identified listening as "a very strong foundation for growth as a servant-leader" (Ferch & Tormey, 2015, p. 81), I will identify four individuals in my life who made a positive difference for me through their Level 1 listening. Using these mentors as models, if I am to listen as a servant-leader, my goal is to listen at this highest level in order to understand those I serve.

MY STORY

Growing up in the 1960s and 70s, I was a girl who loved sports, but compared to the boys of my generation, I had little opportunity to compete. Whether it was in my middle-class suburban Denver neighborhood, the park, the playground, or the recreation center, I still found a way to play, and I was always looking for a game. I was accepted by the boys to join their informal games and I was usually the only girl in the game. It was a source of pride that the boys in my neighborhood would come to my house to invite me to join them,



perhaps because I matched their competitive spirit and aggressiveness. However, I longed for an opportunity to put on a uniform and compete on a real team. My brother played organized football, so I attended every one of his practices and games. My involvement in football included drilling him in the front yard and providing constant unsolicited feedback on his effort. Despite being a skinny kid, I played tackle football with the boys during school recess, sneaking some shorts to school to slip on under my required skirt. Though I had fun at recess, I wanted to put on pads and a helmet and show what I could do on the field. I vividly remember watching an NBA game between the Boston Celtics and the New York Knickerbockers on TV when I was about 10 years old. I was totally mesmerized by the game, as I had never watched professional basketball. I also thought “Knickerbockers” was the greatest name for a team. After that day, I wanted to shoot hoops all the time, so I begged my dad to put up a hoop at our house. We didn’t have a driveway, so after more pleading, he bought a backboard and basket and attached it to the patio roof gutter in our backyard. Much to my mother’s chagrin, the grass under and around that hoop was always dead. During my teenage years, my love of sports and competition became more intense. The chance to compete in some recreational tennis tournaments gave me an outlet for those competitive juices. I discovered I was a naturally skilled tennis player, and I loved to practice and improve. Tennis was one of the few sports in which women were spotlighted, so I carefully watched my favorite players, Billie Jean King and Evonne Goolagong on television. I then took my racket and balls to a court with a backboard to imitate the strokes of these great athletes.

As much as I loved tennis, my mindset was geared more to a fast-moving team sport like basketball, and this wonderful game became my biggest passion in high school and beyond. I believe if the opportunity to play soccer had been available, that may have been an even more



ideal sport for me because of my small stature. My son, who has a mentality and athleticism very much like mine, found his passion in soccer from the first time he tried it at age five. Born in 1994, he and the boys and girls of his generation had opportunities in almost any sport, free to pursue their athletic dreams. Until 1972, girls of my generation could dream, but we were severely limited in the pursuit of those dreams.

A LAW THAT LISTENED TO SOCIETAL CHANGE

In the summer before ninth grade, and without my awareness, the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 was about to change my world. In short, Title IX says, “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (The United States Department of Justice, n.d.). One could easily argue the largest initial impact of this law was to dramatically increase opportunities for girls and women in school and collegiately sponsored sports.

As we approach the 50th anniversary of the passing of Title IX, I feel incredibly blessed. Starting high school in 1973, I now recognize the timing of the passing of this federal legislation was fortunate and life-changing for me and female athletes of my generation. Title IX certainly made a difference for me and caused my life to change in a more positive direction, due to my intense desire to compete in interscholastic sports and need for constructive outlets in my formative years. Until the implementation of Title IX, organized opportunities for girls and women in sports were greatly limited. The law was passed during a time of great societal change and provided a needed boost for females to receive increased opportunity in athletics. In Ying Wushanley’s (2004) extensive history of women’s collegiate athletics he explains the volatile 1960’s included “both the civil rights and women’s movements exerting their



influence in almost every corner of American life, [so] the demand for equality in sports also gained momentum” (p. 154).

“Unwanted Side Effects” of Title IX

In an essay written at approximately the same time as the passing of Title IX, Robert Greenleaf (1996) expressed his opinion that laws “tend to have unwanted side effects ... and are coercive” (p. 165). Indeed, Greenleaf might consider this law to be coercive because it forced the hand of educational institutions to provide opportunities for female athletes that were unavailable in the past and the pressure for its implementation was strongly felt by these institutions. When regulations for implementation were finalized in 1975, “all school districts, colleges, and universities were required to complete a self-study during 1975-76 to identify areas of non-compliance, and to develop strategies and timelines for compliance” (Durrant, 1992, p. 61). This corresponded to my senior year in high school when we wore new uniforms, traded ideal practice times with the boys’ teams, and had the first Colorado girls’ state basketball tournament in 1976. The highlight of my high school athletic experience was qualifying for and competing in doubles at the state tennis tournament in the spring of 1976 with my lifelong friend “Goose” who loved sports as much as I did. These effects of Title IX’s implementation were palpable and resulted in these exciting developments in our sport experience as girls but required compromises on the boys’ side of high school sports, mostly due to facilities that were not designed for additional sports.

Just as Greenleaf (1996) expressed “unwanted side effects” (p. 165) of laws, there were a variety of unintended consequences to Title IX regarding interscholastic and intercollegiate sports, including the current debates surrounding guidelines for participation of transgender athletes (Barnes, 2020; Gray et al., 2018). It is hard to believe this quandary of the 21st century was foreseen by anyone as the law was formulated and



implemented half a century ago. Yet, early on, as collegiate athletic administrators anticipated many potential ramifications of the upcoming implementation of Title IX, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) officially campaigned in opposition to the law (Wushanley, 2004, pp. 82-84). Additionally, Wushanley (2004) extensively describes controversy and power struggles regarding control of women's athletics at the collegiate level as Title IX was on the horizon.

A long-standing debate continues to linger as to whether athletic department decisions to cut men's sports were a result of the requirements to comply with Title IX (Bentley, 2004; Messner & Solomon, 2007). This is a complicated issue, especially in collegiate athletics, where the economic realities of compliance may force difficult decisions. In 1974, then NCAA president Alan J. Chapman wrote a letter directly to United States President Richard Nixon, stating institutions of higher education "would be forced to choose 'between massive new costs' or 'major reductions in existing programs'" (Yushanley, 2004, p. 84). Indeed, Greenleaf (1996) predicted "new injustices will be created as we try to erase old ones, and we will likely find ourselves with more tortured decisions" (p. 166). Regarding decision-making, he says, "we are functioning in an unright world, so total rightness is seldom our choice" (p. 27).

Persuasion for Athletic Equality?

Spears identified persuasion as another one of the ten key characteristics of a servant-leader and in decision-making "to use persuasion as much as possible" (Ferch & Tormey, 2015, pp. 81-82). Greenleaf (1996) suggested persuasion as an alternative to laws in solving social problems. He believed "with a social problem, if persuasion alone is used to change what is thought to be a harmful practice, there are not likely to be unwanted side effects" (p. 165). Yet for the social problem of gender inequality in sports, I wonder if



persuasion alone would present such a slow route to the reforms that benefitted my generation of female athletes, we would have missed opportunities we deserved and enjoyed. So many girls and women were denied equal opportunity before the passage of Title IX, including my two older sisters. It seems logical that persuasion cannot be achieved if the people one is trying to persuade are not listening. Indeed, Greenleaf (1996) expressed that “persuasion is usually a slow, deliberate, and painstaking process” (p. 139). Though the fight for equal opportunity in athletics had commenced, without the boost provided by Title IX, I suspect I would have missed out on some of the most valued experiences of my life through sport participation. Girls and women of my generation were ready and eager to compete for our schools in sports, just like boys and men.

As Greenleaf (1996) reflects on ethical decision-making, he posits, “all things change with time and...one’s view is enlarged and enriched with experience” (p. 27). Indeed, fifty years later, I strongly believe the timing of this legislation absolutely jump-started a movement toward equal opportunity in athletics and I and my peers were some of the first beneficiaries. For my athletic career, I consider the passage of Title IX a blessing with fortuitous timing due to lawmakers who were listening to the signs of the times.

A PLACE TO NURTURE SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

In my work as a basketball coach for four decades, I was increasingly drawn to the concept of servant-leadership in athletic settings, even before I had a name for it. I was employed at Viterbo University as head women’s basketball coach for 25 years, where a Master of Arts in Servant Leadership (MASL) was primarily started by Professor Tom Thibodeau in 2001. A servant-leader approach was part of the mission on our small Catholic, Franciscan campus, most prominently demonstrated by our faculty and support staff and



carefully nurtured by our founders, the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration.

In terms of my journey toward servant-leadership, I believe Viterbo University would qualify as my most prominent “place” of fortuitous encounters (Davis & Spears, 2015, p. 1). I often ran into Tom on campus, sparking positive conversations in which he urged me to pursue the MASL. He used his naturally persuasive voice with me, but with my professional responsibilities, I knew I didn’t have the time to pursue a master’s degree with full effort, so I put it on the back burner of my bucket list. However, intuitively I knew I would eventually get to it. I now consider all the times I bumped into Tom on campus to be important in laying the foundation for my next stage in life. When I unexpectedly retired in 2018, I felt compelled to enroll in the master’s program, so with Tom’s help, I registered for the introductory course. Tom and Dr. Rick Kyte, the coursework, and my amazing classmates fostered transformation and healing in me for the next 19 months. As I was finishing my colloquium project, Tom encouraged me to “help prepare the next generation of servant-leaders” (T. Thibodeau, personal communication, 2020), but I realized how much I still needed to develop as a servant-leader and a listener. To fulfill this duty, I was motivated to continue my studies in the Doctoral Program in Leadership Studies at Gonzaga University. Through the intense study of servant-leadership, I was awakened to recognize, reflect upon, and appreciate the servant-leader listeners I have been blessed to know during my lifetime.

LISTENERS WHO MADE A DIFFERENCE

My participation in sports and long career in coaching allowed me to develop many friendships and important relationships with people who shared my interest and passion for sports and competition. The stories I now share made a particularly profound difference for me through Level 1 listening. I reflect with gratitude on these people who influenced me in



a positive way, specifically on four “fortuitous encounters” from my early years as a high school and collegiate athlete through my long career as a basketball coach. In these memories, I continue to draw on the enlightening essays of Robert Greenleaf (1996). Though I can name numerous other wonderful people who influenced me directly and indirectly over the years, these four encounters involved people who demonstrated Level 1 listening to me, resulting in positive changes in the direction of my life as described by Davis and Spears (2013). These people all influenced the way I worked with young people in my career as a teacher and coach. Though I made many mistakes over the years and regret I didn’t consistently demonstrate servant-leadership in my work, I always felt an obligation to give opportunity and build trust with the athletes I served through coaching. Forty years of commitment to student-athletes was my way of giving back to others for these four persons’ gifts of listening to me.

Listener #1: Miss Cherry Roberts

As I was beginning high school, the only sport offered for girls in the fall was volleyball. Of course, I signed up without hesitation. Our coach was a young physical education teacher named Miss Roberts. She was athletic, fun, and loved her work, so her enthusiasm rubbed off on the team. She was also my physical education teacher, so a double dose of Miss Roberts each day was a bonus. She also happened to be the tennis coach, so I was excited to have her as my coach in two sports. Miss Roberts had a special gift as one to naturally give “strokes” (Burley-Allen, 1995). In her case, the positive strokes were “a form of recognition and attention one person gives to another” (p. 26), namely her students and athletes. These strokes included an authentic smile, a joke followed by her distinctive wink of the eye, or making her students feel important and special with her light-hearted persona as she always seemed happy to see us. She also had the intelligent heart described by



Burley-Allen (1995) as “a way to have a positive influence on others” (p. 27) because she seemed to intuitively know when Level 1 listening was just what a student needed.

My home life at that time was quite chaotic. For reasons I will never know, my mother suffered from depression, and my father didn’t know how to handle her, so there was constant tension in our home. Our hard-working and loving father tried to support the family and stay calm, but there were times he lost his composure, and those times were especially confusing and stressful for all of us. The year before I started high school, my mother attempted suicide and was in the psychiatric unit at the hospital for at least a week. This event was always in the back of my mind, with worry that she would try it again and be successful. She spent more time in the hospital when I was in high school. Additionally, my mother did not understand or support my love of sports, so this was a source of conflict between us. To keep the peace, I didn’t talk to my mother about my activities, but I was determined to live my high school life on my own terms. Luckily, my dad always told me to “do my own thing,” and though his work schedule did not allow him to attend my competitions, I knew I had his full support.

I think Miss Roberts sensed my need for someone to talk to, and she offered herself as that someone. She made time for me, and we would sit down and talk about my home situation whenever I needed. She didn’t give me advice unless I asked, but what she did give me was helpful. She was a Level 1 listener, but she wasn’t a “rescuer” as she didn’t “make my problems [her] own” (Burley-Allen, 1995, p. 35). It was helpful that she gave me time and space to talk things through to my own conclusions and solutions, fostering my independence. I sensed at the time how blessed I was to have an adult in my life to be a sounding board. I believe to this day that Miss Roberts helped keep me on a positive and successful path, simply by “being there” and allowing me to vent in a way not



possible with my peers. My life could have gone in a different direction, and we both knew it. I gradually learned to handle the home situation, and though I needed her listening ear less and less as I progressed through high school, I knew she was present, and I felt so fortunate and happy that she was my coach. In Greenleaf's (1996) terms, she was a strong and aware person with a sense of responsibility and accountability to her students, who were positively "affected by her thoughts, words, and deeds" (p. 41). Miss Roberts also possessed the important qualities of Greenleaf's description of a confidant (p. 86). She was the first person in my life with whom I could confide, while I was seeking to grow my strength as a youth while in the preparation stage of being self-reliant and self-sufficient (p. 87). Finally, I believe Miss Roberts glowingly passed Greenleaf's (1977) test of a servant-leader because she helped me to "grow as a person...to become healthier, wiser, freer [and] more autonomous" (p. 27) during my high school years.

Listener #2: Coach Bob Cortese

The summer before my senior year in high school, the core members of our basketball team played regularly in the main gym at the high school to stay in shape, work on our shooting, and stay together. We were reaping the benefits of Title IX but had no real awareness that a federal law was the reason we were getting new uniforms and traded off the "good practice times" with the boys during our junior year. Our circumstances were steadily improving, and our skills were improving as well. Our core group was concerned that we didn't have a coach for the upcoming season, but no one outside of our team seemed to care. One day a stocky, dark-haired man walked into the gym and introduced himself as Coach Cortese, the new football coach. We heard he was brought to Arvada High School to "win a state championship." He told us we seemed dedicated and that he had coached some girls' basketball in one of his previous jobs. Though this conversation was 45 years ago, I



remember my heart doing a leap and how excited we all were as we asked him if he would be our coach. He said he would think about it, and as he saw us in the gym regularly, we had more conversations with him about the possibility. One day he asked us, “If I agree to be your coach, will you agree not to cry when I’m tough on you?” Without hesitation, we agreed!

One must remember this was 1975, and regardless of Title IX, to our high school administrators, football and boys’ sports were still the primary focus. We found out later the school principal and the activities director told Coach Cortese he was at AHS to coach football and win a state championship, *not* to coach girls’ basketball, so would not agree to let him coach our team. Coach Cortese replied that if he was not allowed to coach us, he *would not be coaching football either*. We now had our coach, and we were ready to be pushed, to play with discipline, and to work hard. He was great fun but taught me how and when to draw the line of when to have fun and when to get down to business. We worked hard for him and for each other. These were all the things Coach Cortese brought to our team and my senior year of basketball was the best playing experience of my life. Coach Cortese appreciated my competitive spirit and told me he often expressed to his football players they needed to be as competitive as I was. He was instrumental in preparing me for a move to the next level and recommended me to Coach Jerry Zancanelli at the University of Colorado.

I still find it remarkable that Coach Cortese, a coveted football coach in the mid-1970s, listened to a group of girls, stood up to the administration, and took us under his wing at a time when girls’ sports were generally considered unimportant. Our fortuitous encounter in the summer of 1975 with this man fostered my work ethic in sports that led to future success. To this day, I carry his influence in my heart and habits. Despite the opinions of administrators that coaching girls’



basketball would take energy away from the football team, Arvada High School won the 1976 AAA Colorado State Football Championship the fall after I graduated, in just his second year at the helm.

Listener #3: Coach Rene Portland

My athletic career moved right in sync with the implementation of Title IX, but at the time I was oblivious to this fact. I was happy and proud to be a collegiate athlete at the University of Colorado Boulder. I was also happy and relieved to be away from home. I was not aware of the details regarding implementation, but my collegiate playing days coincided with a “three-year extension to allow transition time to meet Title IX requirements” (Durrant, 1992, p. 61). In retrospect, this transition was clearly happening as I continued playing basketball at the collegiate level. During my freshman year, our basketball team didn’t have a locker room, Coach Zancanelli was part-time, and we travelled everywhere in 15 passenger vans. We spent long hours on the road and sometimes pitched in our own money to eat a decent meal. The men’s and women’s athletic departments were separate, and definitely not equal. We felt a bump in funding during my sophomore season, as we flew to one road game, and seemed to have a bit more meal money. Despite the obvious inequities, I loved my experience, my teammates, our coaches, and I was developing as a player.

In 1978, the spring of my sophomore year, we received the surprising news that the men’s and women’s athletic departments were merging, and our popular coach would not be retained. This was the year when “all school districts, colleges, and universities were required to comply in all areas [of Title IX]” (Durrant, 1992, p. 61). It was time to go “big-time” and the athletic director was recruiting to bring a big-time coach to the women’s basketball program as we began the transition from the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) to the NCAA. I now realize this was all due to the requirements for



compliance with Title IX, as the men's programs had been well-funded for many years. Sometime that summer, we learned that Rene Portland, an up-and-coming young coach from Philadelphia, would be our new coach. When we met with her, it was clear she was coming from a different culture, as most of our players were from Colorado and surrounding states. She had an accent and an attitude, stating her high expectations from the start. We were supposed to call her by her first name, but I can say confidently that we were all intimidated and afraid of her except "Corky" who she brought with her from her previous job at St. Joseph's University.

Rene held tryouts, and with the new recruits and Corky, I barely made the 12-woman roster limit. But I made it and that was all that mattered! That season was the hardest I ever worked, but Coach Cortese had prepared me for it. It was overwhelming to learn a new system, a new style of play, and the expectations were indeed extremely high. Rene once told our team that no one "west of the Mississippi River" really knew how to play basketball, and she would be recruiting hard to bring the team up to her expected level of play. Though very demanding, I enjoyed the experience, improved, and as I adjusted to her coaching style, I learned more about basketball in that one season than I had in all my previous years playing the game. We also had the fun experience of a winning season, and enjoyed our own locker room, while flying to most road games, staying in nice hotels, and being handed 20-dollar bills for dinner. I was living the life of a big-time college athlete, but, as the season progressed, my skill set was not catching up to the high standards. My game minutes were limited, and most of us were still afraid of Rene.

Going into my senior year, my head knew I wasn't going to make the 12-woman roster. However, my heart told me I had to try. Rene had several recruits and transfers coming from "east of the Mississippi River," and I could do the math. After several days of tryouts, I was cut



from the team, but the way I and others were cut bothered me. Rene said she would put a list with the names of the 12 players who made the team on the training room door. I went to the door, and as expected, didn't see my name. I walked away while shedding some tears as I was hit by the reality that my basketball career was over, and I had no choice but to accept it.

It was strange to go to classes without scheduling practice into my day, not enjoying camaraderie with my teammates, not looking forward to the games. I felt a bothersome nudge that I needed to tell Rene I didn't agree with the way the team was announced. I called the athletic office and asked to set up an appointment to talk to her, and she agreed to meet with me. On my way to the meeting, I was nervous, and I was probably shaking when I had to confront this intimidating woman, face to face. I told her I felt the posting of "the list" on the door was impersonal and inappropriate after I put three years of my life into the program. I'm not sure what my exact words were, but most likely I just expressed it "was wrong." I had no idea what her reaction would be when I set up that meeting, I just knew I had to get it off my chest. Though I was afraid of her, I think I was in the "I'm not okay, you're not okay mode" (Burley-Allen, 1995), but Rene was clearly not in that mode. I know she was listening, as she gave me her full attention. The amazing thing I remember was a pause that seemed to last a while, but maybe I was just holding my breath. In Greenleaf's (1996) view of "openness" (p. 72), I believe Rene withdrew and returned, allowing her to acknowledge my feelings with grace. Then she took the acknowledgement a step further, told me I was right, and thanked me for the meeting. My hope is this was a fortuitous encounter for her to develop empathy as a young coach.

Much to my surprise, a few weeks after our meeting, I received a phone call from Rene. Keeping in mind there were no cell phones in 1979, and I didn't have an answering machine, it required some effort on



her part to reach me by phone. She told me there was an assistant coaching position open at the high school down the hill from the university, and I “wouldn’t have to know much.” She said she thought I might be a good coach. Coaching was not something I ever considered before that phone call. Now, I was thanking Rene, pursued the sophomore team coaching position at Boulder High School, and my unexpected lifelong career was launched. I had so much fun with those little hustlers who reminded me of myself six years earlier, while serendipitously finding a new passion for coaching the game I loved to play. Despite her words, ironically, I knew quite a bit just from being on Rene’s team for a season and utilized many modified versions of her drills and philosophies throughout my career.

Hired to teach science at Boulder High School in 1982, I also moved into the head coaching position. Our 1984 team won the school’s first state championship in girls’ basketball. Rene had since moved on to Penn State University but took the time to send me a congratulatory note, a gesture I will always appreciate and cherish. I sometimes wonder if Rene’s phone call to me would have happened if I had not initiated that meeting to state my opinion to her so many years ago. In terms of my career, I know that phone call may have been my *most* fortuitous encounter, the catalyst for all the challenges, as well as rewards of my four-decade coaching career.

Listener #4: Sister Jean Moore

After 13 years in the high school setting, mostly in Boulder, life choices and life changes landed me in a collegiate head coaching position at Viterbo College (now University) in La Crosse, Wisconsin. Shortly after I was hired in 1993, I was checking my mail and a woman stopped me to introduce herself. She shook my hand and said something like, “Hi, I’m Jean, you’re the new basketball coach, right?” After confirming I was the new coach, she said she was a basketball fan, she



was “glad they hired a woman,” and she would be at the games. At the time, I didn’t know Jean was a professor and a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration. Indeed, Sister Jean Moore was a fan and enthusiastic supporter of our team for the next 25 years. She was the “leader of the pack” when it came to getting the crowd to bang their feet on the bleachers when the games were close and we needed a defensive stop. Sr. Jean later served as my supervisor when she became Dean of Students, and then Vice President of Student Life. When a “team chaplain” program was developed by campus ministry, I requested her service in this role and she enthusiastically accepted and embraced the chaplaincy with our team.

An entire essay would be necessary to fully express what Sr. Jean did in her chaplain role for more than a decade, and what she meant to our players and coaching staff. Simply put, she was present to our team, loved us unconditionally, and we all felt it. My favorite Sr. Jean ritual was called “holy bubbles.” As the team was running into the gym for warm-ups, she would blow soap bubbles on them, eliciting smiles and laughter from everyone. When our team needed help with conflict resolution, Sr. Jean was always there, as her extensive experience counseling prison inmates paid off with our team’s comparatively minor conflicts.

Most importantly for this essay, Sr. Jean was the best of the best when it came to listening. She was an outstanding golfer, and I often felt our time on the golf course became a philosophical discussion between shots. Being a scholar of St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi, she was a master of contemplation and discernment. St. Clare’s method of contemplation to “gaze, consider, contemplate, imitate” was something Sr. Jean utilized regularly in her life, and she taught the method to me and countless others looking for spiritual guidance.

Over the last eight years of her life, Sr. Jean became my best friend. I’m not sure I was her best friend, but she was mine. Late in my career, I



faced some difficult professional challenges and ethical dilemmas. I could always turn to Jean, because from our long-standing relationship, she understood me, and as a retired employee, she understood institutional politics. One time, shortly after I retired, we sat in the back of the campus chapel after Mass and I talked, talked, and talked some more. This was not my intention, but she was fully present and listened as the floodgates opened. At a time when I needed to express various components of a very confusing situation, her calming presence helped me talk through it. Much like Miss Roberts more than 40 years earlier, Sr. Jean listened without judgement. Instead of an opinion, she helped to restore my dignity through her true listening (Burley-Allen, 1995). Often, but that day especially, Jean showed many of the signs Greenleaf (1996) outlined for a *strong* person. When I was at a very low point in my life, she “listened, really listened,” “communicated something that words can’t tell,” and I was “convinced by her presence” that I still had dignity (p. 97).

Over the next 15 months, Sr. Jean’s health was declining with several underlying conditions. I believe during that time I was able to reciprocate her gift of listening to the best of my ability. I tried to be present for her as she had been for me. Early in 2020, she had some minor surgery that resulted in an infection she was not able to fight, and we lost her on March 3. It happened so quickly I was not able to fully express to her how important she was to me, but she was such an intuitive person, I believe she knew. More than a year later, I’m greatly missing my true friend.

CONCLUSION

My time as an athlete and my long coaching career were full of encounters that I would consider fortuitous. Ultimately, relationships are what amateur sports should be about, and relationships are what I value most. The fortuitous timing of Title IX led to my opportunity to be a participant and coach in competitive athletics. Without this law, the



shaping of my life values through sports and the influences of my many coaches, teammates, as well as the student-athletes I served would not have happened. In my story of fortuitous encounters, Miss Cherry Roberts and Sister Jean Moore were the sturdy bookends of listening presence during my times of need at the beginning and end of my career. Coach Bob Cortese stepped out in front, daring to be different, and defying the norms of the times. He believed in me and my teammates, not as girls, but as athletes during the formative stages of girls' and women's sports. Coach Rene Portland demonstrated listening and empathy, followed by her initiative and efforts to suggest coaching to me, launching my long and rewarding career. These specific instances of listening are just a few of the many fortuitous encounters that nurtured purpose in my life through athletics. Finally, at Viterbo University my servant-leader mentors Tom Thibodeau and Rick Kyte encouraged me to continue my studies, so I will someday be qualified to realize Tom's commission to prepare the next generation of servant-leaders. I am grateful for my continuing journey to servant-leadership forged by people, a place, and a law.

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