

The Excellent Life of Kay Yow

✖ As a freelance writer and occasional author, one of the perks is spending quality time with some pretty cool people including Tony Dungy, Albert Pujols, Richard Petty, Tobymac, Chris Tomlin and Joel Osteen.

And while some are more famous than others, perhaps none have been more significant than Kay Yow.

For those not familiar with Yow, she was the head women's basketball coach at North Carolina State from 1975 until a few weeks ago when she stepped down due to recurring health issues. Coach Yow amassed over 700 career wins and led the 1988 U.S. women's basketball team to the Olympic gold medal. She was also a member of the Naismith Memorial Hall of Fame and the Women's Basketball Hall of Fame.

And that's just the short list of her on-court accomplishments.

More importantly, Coach Yow was steady in her faith despite a 22-year battle with breast cancer. She made a difference in the lives of the young women who played for her and everyone else she touched at NC State. Yow also had a profound impact on women's basketball as a whole and inspired aspiring coaches to pursue excellence without sacrificing a single ounce of integrity.

Last Saturday, I stood in the lobby of a restaurant waiting for a takeout order. A nearby television that was tuned into ESPN revealed the sad news. Coach Yow had passed away at the age of 66.

Needless to say, it was a good thing I had not yet removed my sunglasses. My eyes welled up with tears as a strange mixture of grief and gratitude overcame me. I felt sorrow for the many friends and loved ones (or better yet, ones who loved her) that would no longer see her infectious smile each day. I was also thankful that Coach Yow was finally healed of that dreaded disease and enjoying her new body and the reality of God's heavenly glory.

And here's the really odd part. The sum total of my personal experience with Coach Yow is a little less than an hour. I had the privilege of interviewing her last summer for a Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) project and without hesitation I can say it was one of the best journalistic experiences of my life.

The title of the book is *Excellence* (Regal Books) and features some of those aforementioned superstars (i.e. Dungy, Pujols, the Pettys, etc.) as well as Coach Yow's personal hero John Wooden). And with no disrespect to anyone, I'm sure they all could learn a whole lot about excellence from her stellar example.

In Titus 2:7, the Apostle Paul tells us we should, "Set an example of good works yourself, with integrity and dignity in your teaching" (HCSB). What an amazing picture of how Coach Yow conducted herself as a coach, as a mentor, as a friend and as a disciple of Christ.

In her honor, I'd like to give a few of Coach Yow's tips on how to live the excellent life.

1) Follow the Leader

"I love to study Jesus' attitude in all of the situations He faced and how He responded and He dealt with things," Yow told me. "That's the exciting part for me-to not just to understand excellence in the field of sports, but in a life guided by Jesus' example. He has an example for what it takes to have excellence. And to me, excellence is all about glorifying God."

2) Show Character

"You need to develop the characteristics and qualities that give you the best chance at being successful," Yow said. "I think that people without character, they always fall short of excellence. No matter how talented they are or how great they are, they will fall short. At the time you need them the most, they will fail you."

3) Speak Truth With Love

"You deal with people by encouraging them," she said. "Of

course, you have to correct, but there's that saying, 'Truth without love is hypocrisy.' You cannot love without truth. You've got to tell the truth to help them move to a higher level. But if you give the truth without love, it becomes very cold."

4) Redefine Success

"When people think about excellence, a lot of times they're thinking about the end result-the production," Yow said. "I think they forget about the process and about the journey. This is where all the learning takes place. People don't always see the big picture. They see more of the short term. To so many people, success is just money or position or power or title. Yet, if one hasn't given their very best and they haven't done it in the way that it should be done ... then that's not excellence. A commitment to value and doing it the right way is just as important to excellence as anything else."

One of Coach Yow's favorite scriptures was found in Colossians 3:23-a passage that should serve as the cornerstone for anyone who seeks to live their own excellent life as a form of worship unto God. It says, "Whatever you do, do it enthusiastically, as something done for the Lord and not for men" (HCSB).

I can only hope to live a life that displays a fraction of the kind of excellence Kay Yow exhibited. She pursued excellence "enthusiastically" in this life and I have to believe that she will continue to do the same in the next.

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