

CELEBRATING



Unified Sports®

MARY KATHRYN LLEWELYN

BUNNELL HIGH SCHOOL, STRATFORD

"IF WE'RE THE CHRISTMAS TREE, SHE IS THE STAR ON TOP."

Joel Cookson
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The perfect metaphor may not exist, but the above quote from Bunnell High School, Stratford, Athletic Director Wayne Thrall, describing senior Mary Kathryn Llewelyn, and her place in the Bulldog community, comes close. It's seasonally timely, mirrors the image of her being raised aloft as a member of the Bunnell cheerleading squad, and most appropriately highlights her status as a shining example of joy and exuberance within the school.

The thing about decorating a tree – people enjoy how nice it looks, but don't often pay attention to the effort it took. Mary Kathryn's journey to tree-star status is filled with constant support and indefatigable persistence from her and those around her that helped unleash her irrepressible joy on the world.

She was born premature and as an early maternal scan suggested, with down syndrome. Her early years featured the expected struggles for a child and family dealing with that complicated medical circumstance. Mary Kathryn didn't walk until 27 months. She struggled mightily and still deals with intense fatigue. Intelligible speech came far later as she had no expressive language until the age of seven. Progress on these and many other physical and academic fronts were slow, sometimes halting.

As if that wasn't enough, a terrifying and severe case of RSV (Respiratory Syncytial Virus) at six-weeks old nearly cost her life. She survived and continued to make slow and steady progress buoyed by a supportive family, and her own tenacity.

"At a very, very young age she's had typical persons whether adults or kids right there with her, getting her engaged, keeping her active," her father Alan explained. Her mom Kate added, "she's so driven to try and keep up with others or stay engaged and keep going with an activity. She does not want to be looked at as being different, she wants to be doing what her typical peers are doing. That has been Mary Kathryn's motivation."

A pattern emerged in those early struggles that paved the way and remains relevant for where she is now. Kate and Alan, along with her older sister Eliza, supported Mary Kathryn intensely to make progress through therapy and activities. That was paired with her own internal drive and desire to keep up to help push her forward.

That dynamic was particularly at play in the relationship with her deeply invested older sister. The two would challenge and nudge, inspire and provoke, helping each other grow in the process, and become incredibly close. In fact, seeing everything her sister has gone through medically has inspired Eliza, now a junior at Sacred Heart University, to pursue a career as a PA.

"I would not be half the person I am today without Mary Kathryn," Eliza said. "I wanted to instill that motivation into her from a young age and wanted her to carry that with her. The relationship I had with her made me realize that I could push her. I always try to serve as a good role model for her, but I always tell people that she's been a greater role model for me than I've been for her."



As she grew older, stronger, and more able to take part in activities, the Llewelyn family branched out to insure she had ample opportunities to grow and spread her specific brand of enthusiasm and joy. First, it was an after school running group late in elementary school that helped her eventually complete a mile run late in the school year. Later on, she took part in a Unified Pop Warner cheerleading team, joining with peers with and without disabilities. Then, in middle school, it was the Connecticut Stars, a cheerleading team specifically for people with special needs, where she showed off her skills and commitment.

"People would push her, and challenge her, and a lot of times she would rise to the challenge," her mom noted. "As much as they could include her, they would include her...it's been the people in her lives. She has learned from her cousins and from Eliza who is her hero."

The tenor for her high school career was set as a freshman – the one-year Mary Kathryn and Eliza were in high school together. The two both took part in Unified Sports and were members of the cross country team, where despite dealing with fatigue as a result of her condition, she competed throughout the season, running modified distances.

That cross country season, along with immediately getting her involved with a high school activity granted the family the first of what would become many special moments. As her dad explains, "Mary Kathryn wanted to do that with her [Eliza] – and she's a great runner but lacks the stamina. The final meet was touching. It was Eliza's last meet as a senior, Mary Kathryn met her at the end of the track, as Eliza came out of the woods, she met her and they ran down the straightaway together."

It's the same story of support, motivation, and inspiration. Mary Kathryn is involved in numerous activities which provide valuable inclusion, but give her the motivation to try and keep up with her typical peers. Meanwhile those peers draw inspiration from her efforts and from her ability to keep up and work hard. Through her perseverance, her language, reading and comprehension have advanced to the point that in many subjects she is taking classes with her neurotypical peers.

As it has for so many, the Unified Sports team provided a welcome place for Eliza to see clearly that even after she graduated, Mary Kathryn would be included within the fabric of Bunnell. Eliza laid the groundwork in her first year, and then Mary Kathryn's energy and joy did the rest. She's been a four-year participant in three Unified seasons, and was selected as a captain this fall. That was a moment Bunnell Unified Head Coach Barbara Poisson and the other Bunnell Unified staffers say will stand out for awhile.

"That first practice when she was named captain – the smile on her face brought a lot of joy to me," assistant Unified coach Jon Och recalled.

"She just lights everything up," Poisson explained. "I remember when she came for her visit in eighth grade and saw the space and told me 'I can't wait to be on the Unified team' and I said 'we can't wait to have you.' She is a beacon here at Bunnell that lights everything up."

"Having the support of her peers in Unified has helped make her feel comfortable in the school and encourage her to push herself and take some risks," Thrall said. "She has that support system in place and it has encouraged her to take some risks she might not otherwise take."

Her selection as a Unified captain this fall made clear what had been slightly concerning for the Llewelyn family: would Mary Kathryn continue with the same level of inclusion and involvement without her big sister there looking out for her? The answer has been an unequivocal "yes." Not only has she thrived, she has taken over the school with her warmth and spirit.

"She's been such an active participant in Unified, and to see her level of involvement and the joy she gets, but also the joy she brings to others," Unified assistant coach Elizabeth Wasilewski explained. "To see the partners grow and their involvement and engagement and the true understanding of how to be a partner and support and share in the accomplishments big or small. MK has been there to cheer everyone on, every aspect, on the court, in the hallways, it's just awesome."

She is such a singular and well-known presence in the school that Och noted one of Bunnell's assistant principals has the same initials as Mary Kathryn but as far as her Bunnell peers are concerned, "she's [Mary Kathryn] is the real MK, there's only one MK in this building." Even her sister concedes that despite Eliza's lengthy list of accomplishments during her time as a Bulldog, she is (happily) being usurped by her sister.

"I knew I was going to be graduating and she would have three years without me, and of course people would be super nice to Mary Kathryn in front of me, but what is going to happen when I'm gone, is she going to get the same kind of kindness? And she definitely has. I was Class President and graduated with 12 different cords around my neck, and was in the national honor society and people joke now and tell me 'Mary Kathryn is doing more than you.' And she is and that makes me happy because she's so well known."

Among the near-constant presence of energy and joy Mary Kathryn brings to the school, there are a few special moments that stand out as flashbulb memories for those lucky enough to be in her orbit.

Eliza remembers when she made the choice to honor her sister with the decorations on her graduation cap – and then the pure excitement that came when she made the reveal to her sister.

"I surprised her with it, she had no idea. Mary Kathryn holding the cap and seeing that really let her know how special and big of an impact she had on my whole life up to that point. I think that was super super special and her eyes lit up and she was like, 'for me?' it was super special for her to have a place with me on graduation day."

Thrall and the Unified staff recall a specific snapshot from a Unified basketball game that took place at an assembly with a big portion of the school in attendance. Mary Kathryn drilled a shot and the smile on her face in that instant of celebration stays with those staffers.

"Just the roar of the student section when she hit it, and we have a picture of it with her arms up in the air that is definitely a vivid memory that I will always have," Thrall recalled.

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There was also the moment when Bunnell needed a Unified athlete and partner to represent the school after they were honored with a Special Olympics Spirit of Inclusion Award. The staff chose Mary Kathryn as the athlete, joining partner Joey Darbilli, Poisson vividly remembers the photo opportunities that abounded that night. "To see the excitement when she went up to get the award and then there's one picture of her and Joey hugging with the award in their hands and it was priceless."

The smile gets mentioned most often. A megawatt smile that has been lighting up Bunnell hallways, classrooms, Unified fields, and the past two seasons the football sidelines as her old cheerleading talents came back into play as a member of the varsity cheer squad. Longtime family friend Stephanie Falcone took over as head cheerleading coach Mary Kathryn's junior year, and was determined to bring Mary Kathryn and another peer with disabilities to join the squad. And not as token members – both were full participants up to their ability levels, which includes Mary Kathryn filling a role as a flyer, and routinely being lifted up high into the sky by her teammates. Thrall notes, "it's like the Christmas tree, the star is way up there."

Both her parents and sister see the same dynamic that has pushed her throughout her life taking shape with the cheerleading team. She works incredibly hard to match what her peers are doing, while everyone benefits from presence on the team. Inclusion, motivation, inspiration.

"She's never complained, she's never expressed fear," Kate Llewelyn stated. "She's like I'm going to do this. That's really her attitude with a lot of things. She wants that independence. She is driven to keep up with the Joneses."

She was recognized on senior night with the cheerleaders, and has two more Unified seasons to participate in, among many other big moments to come in her senior year. Her parents aren't entirely sure what the future holds for Mary Kathryn. There are college opportunities she could pursue, but for now her family and the Bunnell community are enjoying and appreciating Mary Kathryn's presence within the school for this senior year. For her family, who know better than anyone how long and hard the journey to this point has been, the heights she has reached are remarkable.

"I'm so proud of her, but I don't necessarily want to say I'm surprised because watching her grow up I knew she was going to turn into something amazing," Eliza explained. "The thing that remains super constant is that we never gave up on each other. She does so much without doing anything – just her presence is so awesome, she's so funny she's such a character. Everything about her motivates me to want to work hard. She puts this beautiful perspective into my life that is so special."

"Going from that emergency room with her being premature, and the RSV and seeing her like that, I never in my wildest dreams imagined she would be on the edge of her 18th birthday walking across a high school football field in a cheerleading uniform," her dad stated with a catch of emotion in his voice.

"We didn't think we would get this far with her being able to talk and have a conversation, and read and be in regular ed high school classes," her mom added. "We want her to be happy with her life and what she wants to do."

From a premature birth, to the halls of Bunnell. From facing the challenges of her disability to starring on the Unified Sports fields. From a young near-death illness to being held aloft on the cheerleading sidelines. There was never a question of the love and support and inspiration she received and provided at home. For this dogged, determined individual, that wasn't enough – she brought that same spirit everywhere, and they are all brighter for her presence.

A Christmas tree doesn't look complete without the star on top. No matter how long, and arduous the process to get it there, the star on top brings the whole picture together. The star is exactly where it belongs.



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