

# Johnson: Steve Whitley's impact felt heavily at George Walton

David Johnson | Correspondent | Posted: Wednesday, December 13, 2017 12:00 am

My son is an attorney in Roanoke, Virginia. He graduated with honors from the University of Richmond and is well on his way to carving out a successful career in the legal profession.

But this isn't a bragfest of a proud father. Rather, it's a tribute to the man who helped my son get where he is today.

My son began high school at George Walton Academy in 2004. He joined the football team, lettered as a freshman and was looking forward to his sophomore season. But a concussion in spring practice and another in the season opener effectively ended his football career.

While pursuing other extracurricular activities, he stumbled upon the school's fledgling debate program. It was comprised of a handful of students who enjoyed verbal jousting and didn't mind being labeled as nerds.

They practiced and competed in relative anonymity. Frankly, few people around the school even knew the activity existed. But one man made it a point to keep tabs on the debate program and supported it to the hilt.

Steve Whitley, who was then principal of the GWA upper school, made sure debate was a priority. He hired a part-time coach (a position I manned for six years), he ensured debaters had all the necessary supplies and equipment, he provided practice space, and he opened the doors during the summer for a preseason camp.

More importantly, he allowed the team to travel whenever and wherever to compete in tournaments. Back then, GWA was in the GISA and thus was not allowed to battle against GHSA programs, so the debate team usually had to travel out-of-state for meets.

Mr. Whitley never hesitated when we asked to travel to such far-flung destinations as Birmingham, Alabama, Lexington, Kentucky, and Nashville, Tennessee, to go head-to-head against some of the best programs in the country.

Such experience proved invaluable for my son, who earned a full debate scholarship in college and parlayed that into law school acceptance and ultimately his current position.

So it was with a heavy heart that I texted him last week with the devastating news that Mr. Whitley had passed away after a long battle with cancer. I'm guessing he, like I, shed a few tears like we'd lost a member of the family. In a very real sense, we had, as did everyone — students, parents, administrators, teachers — associated with his tenure of more than two decades at Ol' G-Dub.

One of my fondest memory of Mr. Whitley occurred shortly after the debate team won a region title several years ago. On the next school day, he called the team to the front office to present it with a first-place trophy.

Halfway through the presentation, he had to pause to compose himself. It was a small thing, but it meant to world to me and the students.

Mr. Whitley never married and thus never had kids of his own. But it's just as well, since he'd have had a hard time distinguishing between his own flesh and blood and the thousands of students he impacted so greatly during an illustrious career.

Having left an indelible mark on an institution he clearly loved, and on more than half of the alumni of GWA, I'd strongly suggest the institution's powers-that-be consider memorializing Mr. Whitley by placing his name in a prominent place on campus.

He could never have paid for the honor as some have. But money could never buy the everlasting influence he had on so many, including my son.

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