

GH-R 8-8-2013

Ray Obermiller

Though Ray Obermiller officially hung up his coaching whistle 18 years ago, his lifelong gift for using athletics to inspire others is evident on the walls of Mayflower Retirement Community in Grinnell, Iowa, where he resided in his later years.

A poster-sized photo hangs outside the Mayflower's workout room that shows "Obe" (as he was widely known) leading a class of fellow seniors in strength exercises. For many years, the caption underneath this photo read: "Hey Coach, are we having 'fun' yet?"

After Ray's death on July 13, 2013, at the age of 84, his friend and fellow Mayflower resident Warren Reinecke changed the caption. Now it simply states: "Ray Obermiller 1928-2013 - Coach, Counselor, and Caregiver."



Obe's three-decade career as Grinnell College's swimming coach produced 20 conference championships, 18 All-American swimmers and two NCAA Division III national diving champions. Promoting exercise at the Mayflower was one of many endeavors Ray pursued after retiring from Grinnell in 1995 as Professor Emeritus of Physical Education. He also continued for many years as an assistant coach for the men and women divers and remained active in Grinnell's town and campus communities.

Obe - who also coached men's and women's cross country and men's track at Grinnell - was inducted into the inaugural class of the college's Athletic Hall of Fame in 1995. He reached even more students as Grinnell's first director of academic advising, a position he held for 25 years.

George Drake, Grinnell College President and Professor Emeritus, said: "People are well aware of Ray's iconic status as the most successful coach in the history of Grinnell College's exceptional swimming and diving program. However, because it is not in the public eye, but no less important, his outstanding contribution in creating and building his position as Grinnell's first academic advising director is less well known. Literally thousands of Grinnell's students have derived huge benefits from what Ray first created and then carried out with wisdom and sensitivity."

The role of caregiver became primary in Ray's life in 2003 when his beloved wife, Rachel Ann (Staley) was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, prompting the couple's move to an independent living unit at Mayflower community where he attended to her needs with help from devoted caregivers who became like family.

Ray Obermiller

Ray Obermiller, 84, of Grinnell died July 13, 2013, at Grinnell Regional Medical Center.

A memorial service is pending at this time. GH-R 7-15-2013

Ray Obermiller 7-18-13

Ray Obermiller, 84, of Grinnell died July 13, 2013, at Grinnell Regional Medical Center.

Ray was Professor Emeritus of Physical Education at Grinnell College and a highly successful swimming and diving coach for the Pioneers for nearly three decades.

A memorial service has been scheduled for 10:30 a.m. Saturday, Aug. 17, at Herrick Chapel, Grinnell College. Burial will be in Hazelwood Cemetery in Grinnell.

Everyone who knew them was inspired by Ray and Rachel's love and devotion to one another. Former swimmer J.J. ("Jim") Williams dedicated his 2007 book "Obe: The Early Years" to the couple: "They are a wonderful example of love and commitment." Rachel passed away on June 24, 2012.

Though Ray would say his life really started when he met Rachel (whom he wed on June 10, 1950), he did experience some notable events prior to their six-decade marriage. Born on Aug. 5, 1928, to Henry and Alma (Gladhill) of Clinton, Iowa, he was their tenth and final child. Two of his six brothers died in infancy. The other four - Carl, Delbert, Edward and Robert - preceded Ray in death, as did his sisters, Elsie and Jane. His sister, Annabelle, survives, as do Ray and Rachel's children - Gretchen (Given), Max, Beth and Tim - three grandsons and two granddaughters.

Although Ray's large family struggled to survive the Depression on his father's factory wages, he enjoyed many adventures growing up along the Mississippi River. And it was at a Clinton pool where he did his first dive - a belly flop off the high board - at age 7. Ray's success as a swimmer and diver in high school won him a full scholarship at Iowa State University, where he competed all four years and captured second in diving as a senior in the Big Seven Conference championship.

During Ray's college years, he met Rachel in her hometown of Denison, where she worked as cashier at a pool he managed during summers. After their marriage, Rachel taught school in Ames while Ray finished his college education. A year later, Ray was forced into a painful separation from his Rachel, who was pregnant with their first child, when he was drafted into the Army. Stationed in Germany, he swam and dove for an Army team that defeated the German national team. At the European Army championship, he not only coached the team but won both the 1-meter and 3-meter diving. He later coached and competed for the Army team in Cairo, where he was also invited to meet

Egyptian President Nasser.

Reunited with Rachel and Gretchen (and soon joined by their first son, Max), Ray began an 11-year stint as a coach and counselor at Central High School in Sioux City, Iowa, in 1955. Squads under his leadership won 13 state championships in cross country and mile-team races. In swimming, Obe's teams compiled an 86-13 dual meet record and produced six All-American swimmers. During this time, he also earned a master's degree from the University of South Dakota. In 1995, Ray was inducted into the Athletics Hall of Fame at the annual Sioux City Relays.

In 1966 Ray learned of the job opening at Grinnell College — and about the college's tuition exchange program offered to children of staff. He made the difficult decision to apply, knowing how hard it would be to send his kids through college on his \$8,000 high school salary. Early on, the going was tough: Only one cross country runner and five swimmers showed up for his first practices. Establishing a swimming program in the college's dilapidated, three-lane pool was also a challenge. (Grinnell is now home to one of the finest small-college swimming facilities in the country.)

As documented by J. J. Williams in his book, Obe quickly turned both programs around, winning the conference swimming title just four years after arriving at Grinnell. He "talked to anyone with the slightest running or swimming talent," Williams wrote. "He even stopped one student running across campus to get to class, and asked him to join the cross country team."

Williams noted the qualities that made Ray a great match for Grinnell-style athletics. "One of Obe's basic rules was: 'Nobody will be cut from the team.' He felt that each student-athlete deserved the experience. ... This high value placed on participation is still the beauty and strength of all Grinnell athletics. All-American swimmers work out next to beginning competitors. It is often hard to determine who derives more value from this attitude — the stars or the beginners."

In fact, many beginners became stars under Obe's patient tutelage. Although a fierce competitor, he always placed competition within the context of sportsmanship and sublimation of ego in pursuit of common team goals. He also respected the challenge his athletes faced as students navigating Grinnell's rigorous curriculum. In Williams' book, many former athletes recalled Obe ordering them to skip a practice to order to fully prepare for an important exam.

Grinnell College alumnus and swimmer Jim Carns noted Obe's "concern for the students, his insistence that academics take priority over sports, and his readiness to help" all added up to make him "a great human being as well as an outstanding coach. ... Ray set a tone for sports that I wish was set by every coach. He pushed you to excel, but not to be obsessive. He built championship teams without sacrificing warmth and courtesy." Obe was also known for his ability diffuse athletes' tensions with a witty quip that put things in perspective.

After his death, dozens of former students and athletes — young and old — sent condolences to Ray's family. Many spoke of what an honor and privilege it was to have been coached by Obe. But from Ray's perspective, the honor was his.

"I want to thank all of the athletes I've coached over the years," Obe wrote in an epilogue to Williams' book. "I could not imagine that I would be so happy with my career choice. After over 55 years of coaching, I still get so much enjoyment from working with young people. I have never regretted a single day I spent in teaching and coaching: It was wonderful to do something I loved doing and still get paid for it."

In tribute to his lifelong dedication to students and learning, the Professor Raymond Obermiller Scholarship was established in 1986. In lieu of flowers, memorial gifts may be made in Ray's honor to this scholarship. Gifts may also be made to the Mayflower Exercise Program or the Mayflower Human Needs Fund, 616 Broad Street, Grinnell, Iowa 50112.

A memorial service will be held 10:30 a.m., Friday, August 16, 2013, in the Carman Center of the Mayflower Community, 600 Park Street, in Grinnell. A memorial service will also be held 10:30 a.m., Saturday, August 17, 2013, at Herrick Chapel on the Grinnell College campus.

A private family interment will be held at Hazelwood Cemetery in Grinnell.



Obe and his Grinnell College mens swimming and diving team, circa early 1970s, pose on the deck of the pool that was later named in Ray's honor in a 1996 ceremony.