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FEATURED

Badges of Honor

OHS principal overcame many obstacles to become a role model

By Renee Beasley Jones Messenger-Inquirer 8 hrs ago



Photo by Alan Warren, Messenger-Inquirer | awarren@messenger-inquirer.com Owensboro High School principal John DeLacey gives a fist bump to Logan Hill as Matthew Richardson, right, follows behind as they enter OHS to start the day. Both students are sophomores. DeLacey greets every student by name at one of the entrances to the school in the mornings.

Alan Warren

While some people try to hide the past, John DeLacey looks for opportunities to share his with students and staff at Owensboro High School, where he works as principal.

As a kid, his road to success was paved with obstacles -- just like the ones many OHS students face.

College seemed a far-fetched dream for a boy who was the third child in a family of seven. He wore hand-me-downs or garage-sale finds and got one new pair of shoes each year. No one in his family had ever attended college.

There was no college savings account with his name on it. He attended on the pay-as-you-go plan, and he was the one paying.

DeLacey started working at age 11, when he took on a newspaper route. While in college, he worked up to 50 hours a week during summers to pay for tuition and books. During the academic year, he worked two jobs and drove from Owensboro to Western Kentucky University three days a week because he couldn't afford to live on campus.

DeLacey did something WKU professors believed to be impossible: He worked full time while he completed his student teaching requirement.

In all, it took him about seven years to complete a bachelor's degree.

Better yet, he didn't stop there. He worked full time, coached football at OHS and pushed through classes for a master's degree and Rank I certification.

Almost like a Boy Scout, he wears those obstacles as badges of honor. His scrappy, never-give-up attitude helped him succeed in life, and it's a mindset he passes on to OHS students.

"We have students who have challenges every day," DeLacey said. "It's important for them to know a lot of people go through difficult challenges, but it's how you approach those challenges, what your mindset is to those challenges and what your determination is that helps you overcome those challenges."

DeLacey, the son of Bill and Sandy DeLacey of Owensboro, grew up on Jefferson Street. The

family of nine lived in a two-bedroom home, where his parents still live today. And, if nine wasn't enough, his grandma, aunt and three cousins joined the household for a while.

All of them relied on one paycheck.

Bill DeLacey, who worked 33 years for Commonwealth Aluminum, taught his son a strong work ethic, and caring educators along the way encouraged John DeLacey to pursue academics.

From a young age, John DeLacey was a sports natural. The 1988 OHS graduate participated in track, football and baseball.

He dreamed of a career in pro sports some day.

Thanks to strong ACT scores and his ability on the gridiron, John DeLacey earned some scholarship money -- not a full ride, though -- to attend the University of Louisville. It didn't last long because he didn't understand the level of study required and was soon placed on academic probation.

That might have caused some young people to quit. It would have been easier to settle for full-time employment and go on with life.

But not John DeLacey.

He jumped that hurdle by returning home to attend Owensboro Community & Technical College, a more affordable stepping stone to WKU. He never let his grades slip again.

Walter Lee, a retired Owensboro Public Schools teacher, administrator and coach, was John DeLacey's math and social studies teacher in middle school. John DeLacey credits Lee with pushing him to excel in academics.

Lee knew John DeLacey wanted to become a pro football player, but he reminded his student that he would need another career to fall back on. Education was the real key to success, Lee reminded his student.

"I was one of those students who didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up," Lee said. "John was really a mirror that I looked into and saw myself. I knew these kids were going through the same thing I went through."

Through the years, Lee and John DeLacey have stayed in close contact. Lee is proud that his former student uses past challenges as a way to encourage students today.

"He's passing things forward," Lee said. "If we all did that, it would be a whole lot better world."

John DeLacey's career in education has taken him into every elementary school in the OPS system as a teacher or administrator. Now, as the principal at OHS, he has a unique relationship with students at the high school. Almost all of them have been his former students at some point in the past.

Many of them deal with obstacles, such as poverty, incarcerated parents, living in foster care, substance abuse and homelessness. But those challenges shouldn't be the measure of their success, John DeLacey said.

He feels it is his responsibility as an educator to serve as a role model for what can happen with hard work and a positive attitude.

"Each family comes with different problems," he said. "It's important to realize you can still be successful. Everyone has roadblocks. I'm in education because I want kids to know they can push through their obstacles and roadblocks."

Renee Beasley Jones, 270-228-2835, rbeasleyjones@messenger-inquirer.com

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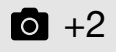


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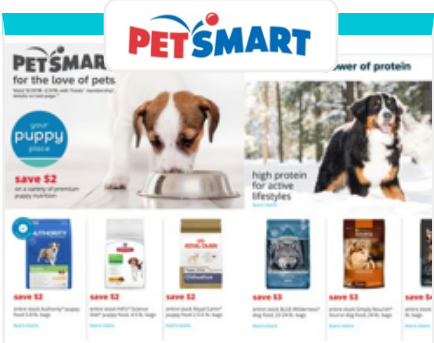
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