



Outlet: Washington Post
Date: Saturday, December 1, 2012

The Washington Post

Thanks to Peter Teeley, BB&T Classic provides hoops, hopes

By Mike Wise, Published: December 1

When we think college basketball in November and December, we usually think of faraway tournaments in exotic locales, with teams traveling thousands of miles for a chance to get on television and play a few strong opponents.

But when was the last time you heard that college basketball changed a 51-year-old man's life so much that he got those teams to come to Washington in December to play Maryland and George Washington, all in the name of changing children's lives. And that those children grew up and changed more children's lives.

What if you were George H.W. Bush's former press secretary and you woke up in a room at Alexandria Hospital in 1991? And during minor surgery to combat stage-three colon cancer, you became so violently ill on the operating table, vomiting while under anesthesia, that they had to put you in the ICU with a severe case of aspiration pneumonia?

"Well, it's Friday," the nurse told Peter Teeley after he finally opened his eyes.

"Friday, the day I went into surgery," Teeley recalled saying.

"No," the nurse began, "it's a week later."

She added, "You're going to make it, but you almost didn't."

Would you think of college basketball at that moment? Teeley, now a two-time cancer survivor, did.

At that moment in 1991, laying in that bed, Teeley wasn't the accomplished politico and future U.S. ambassador to Canada; he was a middle-aged man confronting his own mortality, about to have an important epiphany:



“I basically said to myself, ‘If you get through this thing, you ought to be doing something to help children here,’” Teeley said Thursday morning.

It is now 21 years since he wrote a letter to Abe Pollin, saying he had an idea to raise money for kids: a college hoops tournament in Washington.

Twenty-one years later, though now condensed to a single-day event amid larger financial guarantees to big-time programs from other in-season tournaments, the BB&T Classic has raised almost \$9 million for Washington children’s charities. That’s not counting the coat drive he started nearly three years ago.

This isn’t a story about the doubleheader on Sunday afternoon at Verizon Center — George Washington plays Manhattan in the opener at 12:15, followed by Maryland-George Mason. Instead, it’s about how some very good teams like Massachusetts (back when some guy named Calipari was the coach), Gonzaga, Michigan State and Texas ended up here over the years instead of in Hawaii or Alaska, where the competition and TV exposure might have been better. It’s about the reason behind Gary Williams’s unmatched loyalty to an event that hardly ever helped Maryland’s RPI — and often hurt it.

As author and Post columnist John Feinstein, a member of the Children Charities Foundation’s executive board, said: “It’s just impossible to say no to Pete. He’s relentless.”

Teeley’s brainstorm didn’t come out of nowhere. Before cancer, he was named the U.S. representative to UNICEF. “I learned a lot about the plight of children from all over,” he says. “I began to see the poverty and struggles firsthand. It changed me.” He was also the first to write a U.N. resolution supported by both Israel and Arab nations concerning the plight of Palestinian children.

Seven years ago, long after he was in remission for colon cancer, a malignant tumor was found in Teeley’s tonsils. The cancer this time was only stage one, but it meant radiation and feeding tubes for three months — his wife, Vickie Casey, ground up his medication and vitamins and mixed them with ice cream to concoct a tolerable chocolate-shake diet. He had another lease on life.



So much so that Vickie and he and had a daughter. Rosa is 7 today. Her father is 72. “He’s done so much with his career and so much for others it’s just great that he’s a father again and he can enjoy that part of his life,” Vickie said. “I saw Rod Stewart with his young daughter the other day on television. He looked pretty happy.”

Three years ago, Teeley and his wife went to Lord & Taylor to buy a coat for Rosa. On the way home they decided other kids not as fortunate needed coats. So they went back and bought 500. Last year, Lord & Taylor helped them give away more than 1,000 coats to underprivileged children in Washington.

“We’re standing in front of one of the trucks outside of the Verizon Center two years ago and I see this young girl, about 14 years old, very tall,” Teeley said. “I asked her, ‘Did you get a coat?’ And this girl was clearly someone who looked like she could use a new coat. And she said: ‘I’m not here to get a coat. I’m here to help other people.’”

After she volunteered during the giveaway, Teeley took her aside and asked her to pick out something for herself. “I’ll never forget that,” he said. “It epitomized all the spirit you want in a charitable organization. She needed a coat as much as anyone but she wanted to make sure other kids got theirs first.”

The more he goes on about helping others, the more you understand whom his charity helped the most: Pete Teeley. It gave him something to be part of, a post-career venue to exact change for the better.

Even during his second bout with cancer, Teeley probably missed one Children’s Charities board meeting. Vickie and Rosa will be sitting with him in the 100 section at Verizon Center on Sunday for the games. And for the 18th year in a row, he will attend the charity gala he helped put together on Saturday night. It’s at the Washington Hilton, where President Reagan, Teeley’s boss’s boss, once survived being shot — where a two-time cancer survivor will again be part of something much bigger than merely a college basketball tournament.

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