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Hand, heart build KSU gymnastics

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Rudy Bachnas, long-time coach of the Kent State gymnastics program compiled a record of 262-103-1 over 28 years. (Michael Chritton/Akron Beacon Journal)

KENT: A hand.

If a hand could tell a story, Rudy Bachna's left hand would exemplify the story of overcoming adversity. Of surviving a fire accident as a 9-year-old that left a budding young gymnast's hand mangled and nearly fingerless.

"Four ounces of flash powder and a kitchen stove," is how Kent State's gymnastics program founder, Rudy Bachna, begins his story. "My dad was a photographer, and I used to hold the [flash] for my dad and fire it," he said. "Well, we were in parochial school and the nuns were talking about explosions, mining and quarries. And suddenly, boom!"

Bachna, curious about what would happen, threw the flash powder at the fire on the stove. The size of the explosion stunned Bachna, but he had enough presence of mind to grab his 18-month-old brother Gilbert from a nearby high chair and get them both out of the house as smoke and flames filled the kitchen. Once outside, the older brother collapsed in shock and fainted from the pain as the fire burned through his hand.

"I don't remember crying," Bachna said. "I woke up and we're at City Hospital on Scranton Road" in Cleveland.

The next day, the headline in the Cleveland Press read: Family hero saves brother.

"Here, I practically blew the house apart, and they thought I was a hero," Bachna said, laughing even as he tells the story so many decades later.

But Bachna, now 80, has indeed become a hero — to the thousands of gymnasts he has taught during five decades at Kent State, a program he founded in 1959.

But there's more to his story than refusing to allow a physical disability to stop him from pursuing his dreams. What the accident did was merely redefine his aspirations, setting in motion a path of teaching others instead of simply competing for himself.

Love for people

A heart.

If a heart could tell a story, Bachna's heart would weave a story of love. Love for the sport he grew up with, but more so, love for people. People of all ages who came to his gym over the years to learn and grow through the movements of tumbling, flipping and flying through the air.

"He is the most loving man in the world," said Lynn Bachna, 54, who married Rudy Bachna 15 years ago and jokingly calls herself his "trophy wife." "There are so many people's lives he's touched. We can't seem to go anywhere where somebody doesn't know him, where somebody doesn't come up to him and thank him for touching their life in some way or another."

Most of the time, it takes just a second or two for Bachna to remember the person, whether it was teaching them as a child many years ago in his tumbling tots program or as a teenager coming through KSU's gymnastics program.

A number of people who have learned from Bachna and his late wife, Janet Bachna, came together last month to mark the 50th anniversary of Kent State's women's gymnastics program.

But this month is special, too. Sunday, the defending Mid-American Conference champion gymnastics team will host Central Michigan and Maryland in a meet dubbed "Flip for the Cure" to help spread breast cancer awareness. It's a cause close to Lynn Bachna's heart, a survivor of breast cancer.

Tales of Slovakia

A head.

If a head could tell a story, countless tales of Bachna's history spin out of his, tales of an upbringing strongly rooted in his native Slovakia.

Bachna's father and mother each immigrated to the United States as youngsters with their families looking to escape war and depression. After his parents met, they realized they had grown up back in Slovakia a mere 30 miles apart. Bachna and his three brothers grew up in Cleveland in a tight-knit family that were regulars at a nearby Czechoslovakian Hall.

"I was practically born in that hall," Bachna said. "We had gymnastics, Czech school, Slovak school, a dramatic club, a singing club and all that stuff. As kids, we all but lived there."

Bachna's father began teaching him gymnastics at age 5, and had him enrolled in the Slovak Sokol gymnastics training camp by age 13. In addition to developing his gymnastics skills, the school also taught Bachna leadership and teaching skills. In 1949, the Slovak Gymnastics Union (Sokol USA) hired him as a full-time traveling instructor and director.

"You know how a minister gets the call to parish?" Bachna asked. "Well, I got the call to be a traveling instructor. So I traveled for 10 years from 1949 to 1959, some 350,000 miles driving all over the United States and Canada to Czechoslovakian clubs."

Although his left hand kept him from competing at the Olympic level after graduation from Lincoln High School in 1947 — it prevented him from competing on the parallel bars — it did not keep Bachna from the biggest gymnastics stages.

Rudy and Janet Bachna served as associate coaches of the 1960 women's gymnastics team in Rome, coached two KSU gymnasts in the 1962 World Gymnastics Championships in Prague and served as judges and officials at various international competitions in the U.S. and abroad.

When the pieces of Rudy Bachna's story are put together, they complete a man who has happily given a majority of his life to Kent State gymnastics.

"Rudy has worked so long and so hard to give gymnastics a name here," said Brice Biggin, a former Bachna student in the early 1980s who took over as head coach of the program when Bachna and his late wife retired in 1992. "I don't know if people really understand what he's done for the sport of women's gymnastics."

Although Bachna no longer teaches, he still advises behind the scenes and can often be found in and around the program's offices and practice room at the M.A.C. Center.

"Rudy may not actively coach any more, but he's always here," Biggin said. "He's always interested in what we're doing and looking to lend a hand however we need it."

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