

H O M E C O M I N G

THE LEADER TRIBUNE

Laverne, Oklahoma

We Cover The Town!



Volume 111 Issue 38

Wednesday, September 21, 2011

Seventy-five Cents

September 21, 2011

The Leader Tribune

Page 11

LHS Grad's Book Includes Lessons Learned In Laverne



Devery Youngblood did not like Coach Bill Heaton very much when he was in high school. As an old-school disciplinarian, the Coach found plenty to criticize and challenge in the often aimless and insubordinate young man he coached in both football and track. But when Youngblood made a series of "youthful and stupid decisions" that led Coach Heaton to kick him out of track his junior year, the moment became a lesson that ultimately changed Youngblood's life for good.

That story is told in sometimes funny, sometimes painful detail as the ending analogy to a new book written by Youngblood, titled *Successful Failure: The Ultimate Paradox in the Pursuit of Happiness*. Published by Tate Publishing, the book was just released this month. In addition to his encounter with Coach Heaton, Youngblood also chronicles other moments he experienced growing up in Laverne prior to his graduation from LHS in 1978, including encounters with legendary high school principal Earl Kilmer and the transformational experience of his father's surprising illness and death two weeks shy of his sixteenth birthday.

Youngblood will be signing copies of his book at the LHS library from 3:30 to 7 p.m. on Homecoming Friday.

"I left Laverne four days after graduating high school," the new author said. "But Laverne never left me. So much of who I am today was forged by the people and the values of Laverne, often in ways I did not appreciate at the time."

So it was with the Coach Heaton story. Even though Heaton was five foot, five inches tall, Youngblood swore he towered over his own lanky six foot, three inch frame. "He rode me like a rented mule," Youngblood recalls, taunting him to work harder and pay attention more. When Youngblood chose to engage in underage drinking and fighting in an incident a year after his father's death, Heaton stepped in and kicked him out of track. "It wasn't even track season, so I thought at the time he had no right to do that. Turns out he could do anything he wanted!"

Since track was his favorite sport, Youngblood worked hard at cleaning up his act and getting back into Heaton's good graces. It was what Heaton told him when he returned to beg for reinstatement months later that shocked Youngblood and still to this day causes him to regard his old Coach with deep respect.

"I delivered my well-rehearsed speech flawlessly, outlining how I had changed and why I thought he should let me back in track. He listened in silence and then asked the one question I had never anticipated: 'How are you treating your mother?'" Youngblood said. He said the question stunned him, especially when Heaton told him, "That is what this is all about."

"It was probably the only time at that point in my life that I was speechless, and I actually felt ashamed. He knew that the ways I had been acting since my dad died were unsustainable and destructive, so he made sure I faced a

necessary failure. Then, when he had seen as much contrition and introspection as I was capable of in those days, he dispensed mercy and allowed me to come back into track." Youngblood qualified for the State Track Meet that year in the high jump, scoring enough points to be the difference that led the Tigers track team to the Regional Championship.

"But for years after all I chose to remember was the negative stuff, the taunting, the yelling, the challenging. Only when I matured and began to realize the important role failure plays in our life by eliminating what does not work so we can take the more challenging and rewarding path of strength did I come to realize the compassion behind Coach Heaton's actions. When I did, I learned something very important about life."

Ironically, the story in the book ends with a poignant moment Youngblood and Heaton shared at Laverne's homecoming in 2003; the moment, Youngblood says, the circle was complete and he was fully reconciled with his old coach.

Youngblood credits fellow classmate Teri Curtis with helping him reestablish his connection with Coach Heaton. Curtis took Youngblood's unfinished manuscript to the old coach, read him the section

about their interaction, and gauged his response on behalf of her friend. "He laughed at the parts where Devery describes him yelling at and taunting him, and was moved that the whole track incident became such an important part of Devery's life," Curtis said. She said Heaton only corrected Youngblood's faulty memory about his height. "Devery tried to make him a little taller, but Coach was pretty proud of the fact he was five foot, five!"

Prior to the book being published, the formerly rowdy teenager and his disciplinarian coach reconnected by phone to discuss the story and its place in the book. "It's the nicest he ever was to me!" Youngblood said. "We talked for a half hour and I learned even more about his life and how he was raised. In the end he told me how proud he was of me and that he loved me. I frankly had to choke back the tears. It was a little stunning after all these years to realize the tough coach is now a gentle, sweet old man," Youngblood said.

