



## Beverly Kincaid-Sanna

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— As her fifth-grade year at the old Hollywood Elementary School came to a close, Beverly Kincaid wanted to give her teacher a present. But she had no money to buy one. What she did have, however, was a knack for planning, organizing and floating through the air with the greatest of ease.

And so was born a neighborhood circus.

It featured a one-eyed cat, wild dogs (who were actually her grandmother's rather friendly cocker spaniels), a friend's baton-twirling routine, a concession stand where members of the audience could buy lemonade, a wishing well (actually a goldfish bowl) and — of course — the lady on the flying trapeze.

So it wasn't really a trapeze. But Beverly made the backyard swing set look like one.

"I've always been a backyard monkey," Sanna said.

In the end, the children raised enough money to buy the teacher a nice gift — a \$5 leather pocketbook.

These days, Beverly Kincaid-Sanna is still floating through the air as the owner of Beckley Gymnastics Center for the last 25 years, a hard-working TSA employee at Raleigh County Memorial Airport, a mother, a wife, a grandmother and a friend to everyone from soldiers in Iraq to those she meets in need of a shoulder to cry on.

But to say she's always done so with the greatest of ease would be to ignore the tragedies that have caused her to temporarily lose her grip. In 1989, she lost a 17-year-old son to an accidental electrocution. In the years since then, she's gone through a divorce after a 23-year marriage, her house was destroyed by fire, she lost her father and a brother, and her gym flooded.

In a way, for this longtime gymnast, those terrible things have been like falling off the balance beam. But she has always hopped back on. And each time she does, she carries with her a new skill that helps her help others when they experience similar falls.

To "spot," as the term applies to gymnastics, means to assist a gymnast in safely completing a move. Sanna has and continues to spot hundreds of students on the gym floor; doing so is one of things that keeps her physically fit. But it's the support she's shared with family, friends and even strangers that keeps her truly strong on the inside.

Sanna grew up as Beverly Kincaid in a little neighborhood most folks in the MacArthur area know as the Hollywood Addition. Although she constantly climbed, tumbled and jumped, she really had no formal gymnastics training until she went to Concord College. As a physical education major at a time when gymnastics was gaining popularity, she became a part of the school's exhibition gymnastics team. The coaches and students traveled to area schools, introducing young people to gymnastics and showing their teachers how to teach the skills.

After she graduated, Sanna found work as a P.E. teacher at a large Massachusetts high school, which had a budding gymnastics program and a competitive team. For 12 years, she taught and coached. But then she became homesick and returned to Beckley.

She wasn't able to find a teaching job right away, but she did befriend the owner of a young, small gymnastics school who was planning to move out of the area. Beverly bought the gym and opened Beckley Gymnastics Center on City Avenue in 1983, 25 years ago this month. By then a mother of three, she also found work as a P.E. teacher at St. Francis de Sales Catholic School.

Sanna is quick to explain that for girls and boys, gymnastics is great for overall physical skills development. It was the original P.E., dating all the way back to classic Greece. And those skills can carry over into a number

of athletics, including soccer, cheerleading and anything else that involves coordination, strength and flexibility.

Additionally, she says, it helps students develop discipline. Having to manage homework time and gymnastics time helps them multi-task and manage time well later in life.

Competitive gymnastics helps students develop confidence, she adds.

“Anybody who can get out on a 42-by-42 floor exercise mat, have the music come on, and have two old ladies sit over there watching and judging with a pen and a piece of paper, and have all eyes on them — when you do that routine, you can do anything. You can get out there in front of anybody.”

Many students start as young as 2 and stick with it through high school and college. As Sanna watches them grow, she’s noticing them turn into successful people.

“They know how to juggle life,” she said. And that makes her proud.

Nowadays, she’s coaching students she calls her “grand-gymnasts.” They are the children of former students. Some of them are competing on teams just as their mothers did. And those mothers are her staunchest advocates, frequently volunteering time and energy behind the scenes of the gym. But that doesn’t mean Sanna feels old enough to call it quits. She won’t even consider it.

“I absolutely positively love the kids,” she said. “I think that’s probably why I’m still there. ... You get one or two hugs and could never think about leaving. ...

“Gymnastics is my passion,” she added. “The other jobs have always been my livelihood.”

Her most recent 40-hour a week job has been at the Raleigh County Memorial Airport, as a member of the TSA staff. It was a job she took out of necessity, but one she enjoys.

“After going through the divorce, I didn’t have myself prepared for retirement,” she said.

She had been working for the United States Census Bureau, so when post-9/11 homeland security demands created the new TSA positions in 2002, Beverly transferred from one federal job to the next. She may work in a quiet airport now, but she spent five months training at large airports in Boston, Chicago, Kansas City, San Francisco and Ft. Lauderdale.

“It’s a good job,” she said.

It’s a job through which she’s met many people, and a job in which she sometimes finds herself trying to mute her otherwise spunky personality. For instance, when she encountered a former gymnastics student she hadn’t seen in a long time, the women started screaming with joy — until they realized screaming probably wasn’t the best thing to do in an airport security area.

Post 9/11 America also opened another door for Sanna. With her son, Capt. Scott Mangum, preparing for deployment to Kosovo, she found herself wanting to do all she could to help. Thanks for Serving was an organization born out of the difficulty she encountered when she attempted to send supplies and goodies overseas. Anthrax scares in the mail had made it nearly impossible for an ordinary civilian to mail anything to military members serving in the Middle East.

“But I knew I’d find a way,” she said.

With help from the American Red Cross and many other area residents, Sanna began collecting hundreds of donated items for members of her son’s infantry unit — everything from deodorant to Christmas stockings. At one point, she and her husband, Sam Sanna, gave up parking in their garage because it was so full of items to be mailed. She kept it up for three years, and she continues helping by sharing mailing information with others conducting projects to help the military.

“I did that to keep my own sanity,” she said. “If they would have taken me, I would have gone. But I was too old, so the next best thing was to see what I could do for the soldiers.”

Scott, the father of an 8-year-old son, has returned from duty and is working at his alma mater, Fishburne Military School, where he serves as director of admissions. The school is also home to a memorial to her oldest son, Cliff Mangum. He was a cadet captain there and just weeks away from graduating second in his class when he died on a pre-graduation picnic.

“I lost Cliff 19 years ago yesterday,” Sanna said during a May 16 interview. “... It’s tough.”

She went on to say that Scott had called her the previous day to let her know he had placed yellow flowers on his brother’s memorial bench. Cliff died the day after Mother’s Day and had spent the holiday with his mother. Yellow, she said, was their special color on that day. The loss still hurts, but Sanna — and others — have gained from it.

“With every bad thing that happens to you, there’s always something to learn from it. And there’s something that you can go on and help somebody else with because of it, that you wouldn’t have been able to do if you hadn’t experienced it,” she said. “It’s unfortunate that these things happen to people every day, but those people need to understand you’re not the only one that it happens to. You take from that. Any time anybody has a death of a loved one, I’m comfortable with helping them. I think when you experience a real tragic loss, if you use your bad experiences wisely, you can do a lot of good to help other people.”

The loss led Sanna to become instrumental in a local support group for parents who lost children. It was called Compassionate Friends. The strength she gained there led her to help others, even going as far as being on a call list for doctors and psychologists dealing with people who had recently experienced loss. It’s not uncommon for Sanna to find herself telling a mother something like what to expect from people at her child’s funeral, or to give comfort to a mother passing through the airport on her way to a loved one’s deathbed.

“Unless you’ve been there, you don’t understand,” she said. “But if you have been there, then open your heart to a perfect stranger. ... They need to know that you can overcome, or that you can deal with, all kinds of tragedies and obstacles that come across.”

Sanna credits Cliff’s death with another positive thing — making her other son and daughter stronger people.

“They’ve been able to help when classmates have died, or when other kids have lost parents,” Sanna said.

“They empathize, and they know how to deal with death. They learned young. Scott Mangum would have never gone into the military and he would not be the person he is today had it not been for going through his brother’s death. It altered his life path. He’s been able to do what he’s doing because of having to experience the loss of his brother.”

Likewise, she continued, Brit Kincaid Higginbotham — mother of a 5-year-old boy and 3-year-old girl — is able to deal with tough situations that are part of her job dealing with special needs babies and toddlers.

“She has a lot of hard situations she has to deal with,” Sanna said. “I feel my children are better people and stronger people because of that unfortunate event that they had to go through.”

One might say they’re professional spotters, like their mother — a girl who made sure a teacher she wasn’t even crazy about had a gift at the end of the school year, a student who wouldn’t even take the promotional pencils her father brought home from the bakery where he worked to school unless she had one for everyone in the class, a gifted gymnast who devoted every spare moment to sharing her skills with others, and a giving friend who has turned personal loss into support for others.

“I’ve had friends who have helped hold me up, so I’m spending my life holding others,” she said.

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