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FINE DINING

Retton speaks during annual chamber event

By Amelia A. Pridemore
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BECKLEY — Six-year-old Taylor Openlander wanted to be a state gymnastics champion, but she just had trouble making a “hip circle” move.

That did not stop the young Beckley resident. That night, she pulled off the move, and a new state gymnastics champion jumped into her mother’s arms screaming.

Friday night, Openlander met a fellow West Virginian who annihilated countless roadblocks thrown in front of her and literally showed the world perfection.

Olympic gold medalist and Fairmont native Mary Lou Retton told people gathered at the 90th annual Beckley-Raleigh County Chamber of Commerce Dinner to never let any type of adversity stop them. Her road to the perfect 10 at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics was rocky, as she fought against naysayers and a knee injury just before the games. But those obstacles did not stop her. They just made her stronger.

“That didn’t defeat me. It just fueled my fire,” she said.

Retton recalled watching Romanian gymnast Nadia Comaneci on TV during the 1976 Olympics in Montreal and wanting to follow in her footsteps. Geography, alone, was enough of an obstacle. The world’s top gymnasts, at that time, hailed from eastern Europe.

“Gold medalists were not from America, and American gymnasts were not supposed to be from West Virginia, that’s for sure,” she said.

“Mary Lou from West Virginia wasn’t supposed to amount to anything in the (gymnastics) community I was living in.”



Olympic gold medalist and guest speaker Mary Lou Retton, left, hands out autographs and words of advice to a group of future gymnasts moments before speaking at the Beckley-Raleigh County Chamber of Commerce 90th annual dinner at the Beckley-Raleigh County Convention Center on Friday evening. F. Brian Ferguson



Beckley Area Foundation Board of Directors president, Bill File, left, receives the Community Service Award for on behalf of the foundation from Beckley-Raleigh Chamber of Commerce president Charles Houck during the annual dinner. F. Brian Ferguson

The road involved her meeting Comaneci's coach, Bela Karolyi, at a 1982 Reno, Nev., competition. Karolyi, she said, saw potential and offered her the chance to train with him. That involved some serious sacrifice.

She would have to move to Texas, live with a family she did not know, train with girls she did not know and train with a "crazy Romanian who had only been in American for less than a year."

But her parents made the 27-hour drive to take her to Texas.

Just six weeks before the Los Angeles games, Retton said, her right knee "popped" and she was unable to stand. Surgery was required, and physicians told her there was no way she would heal in time. That was not going to stop her.

"I told the team of physicians, like I did my parents, that I was not going to give up," she said. "I can't live my life wondering, 'What if?' As crazy and unreal as you people think I am, I'm going to do this."

Those who take risks and meet challenges head-on, she said, are capable of the extraordinary. She has a gold medal at home to prove it.

A group of girls, ages 6 to 11, from Beckley Gymnastics met with Retton Friday. The Olympian who was once in their shoes signed autographs and posed for pictures with them. Openlander, Emma Anderson, Reegan Lively, Caroline Booth, Kerrigan Johnson, Lauryn Poole and Logan Ragland could not stop smiling when describing what it was like for them to meet her.

The girls all said they, too, want to compete in the Olympics some day — and their eyes are also on gold medals.

"It would be the best thing to happen to me besides meeting Mary Lou Retton," Poole said.

The Beckley Area Foundation was the 2010 Community Service Award recipient. Susan Landis, executive director, said the odds were seemingly against the foundation when it began 25 years ago. A small community like Beckley, some believed, could not support a foundation. Now, it is bigger than some foundations in larger areas.

"It's a genuinely caring community that has made Beckley Area Foundation so successful," she said.

Charles Houck, executive vice president of City National Bank in Beckley, said no entity deserves the award more. He named a few of the projects BAF has supported, such as the Thornhill Courts park in Beckley, Jim Word Memorial Park and its free Labor Day concert.

"It's a story I could spend 30 minutes on," Houck said. "It's unbelievable what it has done."

Bill File III, president of the BAF board of directors, asked each person who has worked with the foundation or made a donation — even if it was just a dollar — to stand.

"Each of you: This is your award," he said.

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