



COACH VILLA: PASS IT ON

By Marilyn Sharpe

On a brisk Montana morning, I stood outside the Billings Hotel and Conference Center at 6:15am, waiting for a shuttle bus to the airport. The driver was a kindly, gentle, soft-spoken man with courtly manners, whose hands and feet crippled with rheumatoid arthritis. He had served as both security and van driver since 11:00pm the night before. Mr. Villa, I thought, was going to give me a ride to the airport; he gave me so much more.

We hadn't started to move before he began his story. At age 72, he had just retired from coaching middle school kids and he was grieving that loss in his life. This was a man who loves kids and who has shaped generations of them. But his life didn't start out this way.

Villa grew up as the youngest of seven children. When he was only five years old, his father died. His mother moved the family to East L.A., where he became the leader of the Black Widows, a tough, but not illegal gang.

One day, the father of a boy he had beaten up, caught him and called him on the carpet. The father wanted to know the names of all of the gang members who had beaten his son and his son's friend. "Just me," Villa responded. "Really?" came the astonished response.

This father coached a youth football team and invited young Villa to come and play. A scornful Villa responded, "Football is for sissies!" "Let's see how this sissy does," the coach retorted.

Villa knew nothing about football, when he suited up and the coach put him in to play. The first time Villa was tackled, he jumped up and punched the boy who tackled him. He had no idea how the game was played. The coach persisted and Villa learned to play – and love – the game. The ultimate tribute to a coach who had changed his life forever, Villa himself became a coach. (In fact, he even married the coach's daughter, becoming brother-in-law to the boy he had beaten up!)

Seven years ago, the phone rang and a young man said, "Coach, I'm not sure you'll remember me..."

"Just a minute," Villa responded. "Villa's Gorillas, 1978, middle linebacker. What are you doing now?"

The young man was a coach for Lewis and Clark, calling to invite Coach Villa to come to the game the next afternoon. He went. After the game, the young man took his boyhood coach to introduce him to the Head Coach, who asked, "What did you think of the defense?"

"Honestly?" Villa replied. "Not good."

"So what should we be doing?" the Head Coach inquired and listened, as Villa laid out a strategy. The very next day, Villa was coaching the Lewis and Clark football team.

I love imagining how many lives he has shaped, more with his strong, gentle, faith-full caring, than even his football wisdom. Coach Villa made them good players in life, as well as on the gridiron. Coach Villa says it this way, "If I have touched one life, then I will have done what God sent me to do."

So, who have been your life coaches? Who are those three adults outside your family who love, support and nurture your kids? And for whom have you been and are you currently a coach? Each one of us reaches beyond our home to leave a legacy, to pass on both the wisdom and caring of those godly life coaches who have been the face and voice and hands and feet of Jesus in our lives.

I thank God for you, Coach Villa. I hope to touch the lives of others, as you have done.

FAMILY ACTIVITIES

1. Gathered as a family, light a candle and tell stories to honor the important "coaches" in your life.
2. Write a note or call those important people in your life to say "thank you." If they are no longer alive, share the story and thanks with their family, school, organization or a friend of yours.
3. With your children, wonder who might need their "coaching." Think about the shy or new kids.
4. How might your family reach out to include them and shape their lives.
5. Who are you "coaching?" What is the legacy you'd like to leave?