



Julie Anne Neville's No. 24 jersey was retired by Grand Island High School on Friday night. (Jonah Bronstein)

'Neville Strong' crowd gathers to honor legacy of 'Grand Island's golden child'

By [Jonah Bronstein](#) | Published February 2, 2019 | Updated February 2, 2019

It had been nearly 30 years since all of the bleachers were pulled out for a basketball game at Grand Island High School. On Friday night, it was standing-room only by the end of the girls junior varsity scrimmage. An estimated crowd of more than 800 gathered to honor the legacy of the late Julie Roth Neville, a three-sport standout for Grand Island and longtime teacher and coach who died in October at age 40 after a battle with breast cancer.

Neville's No. 24 Vikings jersey was retired during an on-court ceremony before the girls varsity basketball team scrimmaged Royalton-Hartland while wearing black t-shirts with "Hoopin For Julie" emblazoned in pink. Proceeds from the shirt sales and other money raised from the event will go toward the Neville Boys Education Fund to benefit Julie's four sons: Jonathan, 10; Jayden, 8; James, 6; and Jaxson, 4.

"As you can see by how packed this gym is, Julie touched so many lives," varsity basketball coach Kristin Wegrzyn told the audience.

Julie Roth played basketball, tennis and softball for the Vikings, graduating in 1996. She was the first girls basketball player to score 1,000 points and still holds the school record for tennis victories. After playing Division I tennis at Xavier University, she returned to Grand Island as a fifth-grade teacher at Huth Road Elementary School in 2000 and coached the high school's tennis and JV basketball teams from 2002-07.

"Julie was known for her compassion, loyalty, sense of humor, genuine heart and competitive spirit," Wegrzyn said. "I, like so many, had the pleasure of being coached by Julie. She passed on her competitive spirit to so many of us, but also taught us what it truly meant to be a good teammate and be part of a team."

Having stopped coaching soon after she married James Neville in 2006 and began having children, Julie continued to impact Grand Island youth up until shortly before her death.

"After a tough morning in the hospital, she was having trouble moving her left arm because it was extremely sore," Wegrzyn said. "But one of her good friends' kids, Ella, needed to practice her left-handed layups. So there was Julie outside on the court teaching Ella left-handed layups."

Collages memorializing Neville were displayed in the hallway where beads, rally towels, baked goods and basket raffles were sold. Signs reading "Neville Strong," "GI Loves The Nevilles," and "Hoopin' for Julie," hung throughout the gym.

The event went on even after this week's blizzard threatened to put it on ice. Superintendent Brian S. Graham closed Grand Island schools for the third day in a row but allowed the building to be opened for Friday night's celebration. "This is truly an honor to be standing before you tonight as we take a moment to celebrate one of our most outstanding alumni," Graham said. "Julie is truly a symbol of what we are all about here on Grand Island."

The Vikings had to scramble to find a new opponent after the Charter School of Applied Technologies canceled school and athletic activities Friday. Julie's brother, Jeff Roth, the athletic director at Wilson High School, recruited fellow Niagara-Orleans League member Roy-Hart to participate in a scrimmage after the Rams' scheduled game against Buffalo Arts was snowed out.

Niagara Frontier League rivals have joined together to honor Neville this season. Fundraisers were held during games at Niagara-Wheatfield, Lockport and a Kenmore East-West doubleheader.

Niagara-Wheatfield boys basketball coach Erik O'Bryan wrote in a Twitter message that he organized the "Hoops for Hope" event because of his relationship with the Roth/Neville family, "but most importantly, my heart hurt so much for her young boys."

“Julie is the model I would want for my son’s teacher or coach,” O’Bryan added. “She’s a fighter, she’s determined, and she took no crap! So proud of our school district and community that night. We raised over \$3,500.”

Ken-Ton athletic director Brett Banker presented a donation Friday from the “Jamz for Julie” event held last month. Banker is a Grand Island resident and his wife, Jenepher, currently the head women’s basketball coach at Daemen College, led the Vikings’ girls basketball program when Neville coached the JV team.

Donations to the Neville Boys Education Fund have so far exceeded \$40,000, according to Jon Roth, the Grand Island athletic director and Julie’s father. “You talk about a family in the Niagara Frontier League, we are a family and we support each other,” Jon Roth said. “It’s just been so wonderful. ... It really has opened my eyes. I didn’t think people could reach out like they have.”

Jeff Roth explained how Julie wore No. 24 to honor their father, a former baseball and basketball standout who was drafted by the Washington Senators in 1969 and was once offered a Double A contract by Niagara Falls pitching legend Sal Maglie.

“I’m sure all the kids here and probably all the adults all had an idol growing up,” Jeff Roth said. “Every picture that we saw growing up had No. 24. And the guy that wore that was Jon Roth.” Jon Roth’s birthday is Dec. 24 and “he planned things really well with my mother (Jean),” said Jeff, noting his sister was born July 24, 1978, “and from that day Julie Roth and then Julie Roth Neville never took off a No. 24 jersey no matter where she went.”



In his 46th year working for Grand Island, Jon Roth recalled the last time the Vikings had to pull the bleachers out on both sides of the court for a basketball game was when McDonald's All-American honorable mention and 1,518-point scorer Carlin Hartman was starring for the Vikings from 1988-90.

Hartman, now an assistant coach at Oklahoma University, flew home during the Sooners' preseason to attend Neville's wake. "I wouldn't miss that for the world," Hartman said this week by phone. "Julie is like a little sister to me. Coach Roth and the Roth family, Jeff, Jean, are all very important to me."

Seeing the support for "Hoopin' for Julie" and other events in her honor was heartwarming for Hartman. "It shows you how much people in Western New York care about one another," Hartman said. "And the other thing is obviously what she meant to those around her. "Julie was like Grand Island's golden girl. Not only a great athlete but she was one of the sweetest people that I have come across."