



Tuesday, February 12, 2008

By: John Niyo

Freak accident paralyzed her legs, but hardly her athletic drive

DETROIT -- They rolled out the red carpet, and Cheryl Angelelli rolled right in.

She might have been overshadowed by the Class of 2007 at Monday night's Michigan Sports Hall of Fame induction ceremony, but away from the flashbulbs and fanfare surrounding the likes of Steve Yzerman, Desmond Howard and Glen Rice, there was an even more inspiring sight.

It was a woman in a wheelchair, huddling with her parents in a quiet moment before the ceremony. They were smiling broadly for a family photo.

"She has accomplished so much, it's unbelievable," said Pat Angelelli, whose daughter was honored with the Tony Filippis Courage Award at the 53rd annual awards show inside a jam-packed Max M. Fisher Center. "So, no, I never would've expected all this."

She certainly couldn't have 25 years ago, when the family was a portrait of grief.

It was Feb. 4, 1983, when Cheryl Angelelli, then a 14-year-old freshman at Harper Woods Regina, jumped headfirst into a Mt. Clemens pool during a youth club practice.

She and her teammates were practicing a new dive from the shallow-end starting blocks, and Cheryl, the eldest of Ray and Pat Angelelli's two children, jumped too high.

Her forehead smacked the bottom of the pool hard, and she came floating to the surface conscious, but unable to move her arms and legs. Her teammates pulled her from the water onto the pool deck.

Two days later, the doctors told Angelelli, who'd broken her neck and was paralyzed from the chest down, that she'd never walk again. They drilled screws into her skull and fitted her with a halo. And just like that, a teenager's life -- to say nothing of a promising young athletic career -- was thrown into disarray.

A different perspective

"I bet it took me three years to stop crying," Pat Angelelli said. "Every time I would see a young girl with her mother, it hurt. And I'd just start crying."

You'll excuse her, then, if she wiped away a tear or two Monday night as her daughter, now 39 and married, wheeled herself out into the spotlight as the room stood and applauded. Her speech was laid neatly in her lap, but Angelelli hardly needed it as she recalled "the doctors walking into

my hospital room and telling me that I would never walk again and that I'd never lead a normal life.

"They were right: I would never lead an ordinary life," she told the crowd. "Instead, I would lead an extraordinary life. My wheelchair has taken me places and taught me things about myself that my legs never would have."

Angelelli, a two-time Paralympian and double world gold medalist in the pool, is the sixth Courage Award winner honored by the Hall of Fame. She's the first since it was renamed to honor the late Tony Filippis Sr., a beloved Detroit philanthropist who passed away last winter.

"It's because of him that the Hall of Fame now recognizes athletes with disabilities," Angelelli said. "So it's a tremendous honor. And Tony was a friend of mine, so it means even more."

These days, the meaning of that word -- courage -- tends to get twisted around in sports.

"You see these athletes and they get injured, and when they come back, the media says, 'Oh, they're so courageous,'" said Shawn Kornoelje, Angelelli's husband and swim coach. "That's crazy. You're an athlete getting paid to compete: It's your job to come back.

"But if you injure yourself as Cheryl did, or you're born without a limb, or you have to have a leg amputated when you're 2 years old because of cancer, and you go on -- that, to me, is courageous."

Sharing her story

Just don't expect to hear that from his wife. When I asked about last week's awkward silver anniversary, she just laughed.

"I was at the pool training," said Angelelli, busy preparing for her third -- and final, she insists -- Paralympic Games, set for this summer in Beijing, China. "The first couple years, I shed tears. But now, it's just another day, you know?"

I don't, actually. Can't even fathom the journey she's made, from hospital bed to Hall of Fame. But she's used to that reaction by now. For more than a decade, she has been a motivational speaker, talking about overcoming her doubts and fears and insecurity as a wheelchair-bound teenager. And as director of marketing and public relations at the Rehabilitation Institute of Michigan, where she began her long road to recovery, she sees daily reminders of how far she has come.

"It's a very rewarding experience, to be able to share my story with them and tell them that just because you have a disability doesn't mean that your dreams, your aspirations and your goals in life have to change," said Angelelli, whose next goal is the U.S. Paralympic trials in Minneapolis in April. "You may have to change the way that you attain them, but it's still possible.

"So many people say, 'Oh, you're so courageous,' or 'You're so inspirational.' And those are all wonderful adjectives. But, seriously, I'm just living my life."

You can reach John Niyo at john.niyo@detnews.com.