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Relationship at Phillipsburg High School between Tom Fisher and Charlie Bowlby is a special one

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One extraordinary moment.

The Via Banquet and Hall of Fame Induction on Wednesday night at Freedom High School certainly offered the new inductees that one special moment to talk about their accomplishments as basketball players or coaches. It was their chance to have the spotlight on them in front of their peers.

Three of the inductees on hand -- Lauren Mazza Spigner, Bob Schlosser and Tom Fisher -- really didn't stress their achievements but talked more about the people whose lives they touched and whose lives touched them.

It was totally appropriate on a night when those more fortunate and more talented, including the All-Star players, came together for the benefit to those less fortunate.

Via of Lehigh Valley works to help those with disabilities such as autism, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy and the like. The four all-star games will be played Sunday at Northampton Community College with proceeds to benefit Via.

Former Notre Dame girls coach Traci Cyr and Northampton Community College athletic director Troy Tucker provided touching talks about caring for a child with autism. They offered sincere pleas for everyone to contribute, volunteer and get involved to help those in need.

One presentation stood out to me and the hundreds on hand.

Tom Fisher, former Phillipsburg head basketball coach and current athletic director, took the opportunity to deflect the attention away from himself.

Fisher could have talked about being only one of three local coaches to capture a state championship in boys basketball. Schlosser did it twice at Central Catholic and Dick Tracy once at Whitehall.

Fisher could have talked about his induction in the Easton Area High School and St. Louis University Hall of Fames.

He could have talked about all his Coach of the Year awards, including The Express-Times award in 1983, 1984, 1988 and 2001.

And Fisher could have boasted about averaging 24 points a game as a senior at Easton.

Instead, Fisher took the opportunity to salute someone who has not been as fortunate as many of us -- Charlie Bowlby.

Fisher called Bowlby on stage to chronicle his story of devotion to Phillipsburg athletics, in particular the boys basketball program.

If you know anything about Phillipsburg athletics, you know Charlie Bowlby. He's part of the fabric of the Stateliners' sports programs.

Fisher's speech wasn't for show. The two have been inseparable at basketball games for years. In fact while interviewing 'Fish,' Bowlby popped his head in the Phillipsburg athletics office to say hello.

"He does that two or three times a week," Fisher said.

When Fisher first came to Phillipsburg as an English teacher in his early 20s, he only knew of Bowlby as a special education student. Fisher says back then, special education students rarely were allowed to interact with other students so he only knew him by passing in the hall.

But one August day after the 25-year-old Fisher was named the head coach at P'burg, Bowlby stepped forward to address Fisher.

"He walks right up to me at the outside courts and puts his hand on my shoulder and says, 'Are you the new basketball coach? Meet Charlie Bowlby. I'm your new assistant coach.'"

The two have been together ever since.

"In 27 years that guy never missed a basketball game until last year," Fisher said.

"He sat right there," said Fisher, recalling the story while sitting behind his desk. "He shuts the door and says 'I don't want you yelling and screaming and bothering Joann (Osifshin, the athletic department secretary).' He said 'I got tickets to the Wizard of Oz at the State Theatre.' I said, 'No problem I'll get rid of them, that's a sold-out show.'"

"No way," he said. "You didn't consult with me when you retook this job. I had bought this ticket in July. I stood in line to get it. I'm going."

Fisher points how far Bowlby has come over the years despite his disability.

"He used the word consult with me. He said 'You did not consult with me.' There's no way he would have used the word consult 20 years ago.

"After hanging around for years with high school players and hearing them talk and hearing the coaches talk, he's got a remarkable vocabulary. He doesn't pronounce the words right, but he uses them with right connotation. It's incredible."

Bowlby often handled some of the team manager duties. He also helps Tom Osifshin, the Phillipsburg equipment manager, and cleans up Maloney Stadium after football games.

Fisher says as the years passed by, the 56-year-old Bowlby even learned what was needed for winning basketball.

Fisher said he would sometimes let Bowlby address the team.

"Just like it was a script, he'd say: "All right guys, no fouls, no one-and-ones, box out and talk on defense. He'll say it every time.

"And I'd say to the players, there's Charlie, he knows what needs to be done today. You guys better go out and do it. When he talks, there was no laughter, no giggling. All eyes are fixed on him."

Fisher said when he learned of his selection to the Hall of Fame, he immediately considered bringing Bowlby on stage.

"Luckily, I've attended a number of these banquets," Fisher said "I knew the major theme is special needs people. I thought this is the perfect time to introduce him."

Bowlby beamed with pride on stage when the audience gave him a hearty round of applause.

"The mission of Via and Charlie showing these people you can be productive, I thought it was appropriate," Fisher said.

All it took was an open mind and open heart. Something the two have shared for years.

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