

Justine Butler, Gymnastics Coach at the YMCA of Greater Westfield

If someone were to ask me, what's so special about the YMCA, I would be hard pressed to give an answer that was less than 15 minutes in length. From the breadth of programs and classes we offer, to the innumerable ways that the Y connects people with one another, to the amazing, ordinary folks who pass through our doors everyday; members, guests and staff whose presence is nothing but vibrancy, joy and kindness; there just are so many positive aspects about the Y.

Perhaps, through pure serendipity, I have had the good fortune in my Y career of getting to meet a number of absolutely delightful people. And better yet, in my current position, I get to write about them once in a while for the newspaper!

One such individual that I met recently on a sweltering summer day was Justine Butler. She was in the gym coaching gymnastics camp and I happened to be looking for a potential counselor to assist in our arts camp. At the time, I had no idea of her story in life, but that would soon come to light when at our YMCA of Greater Westfield All Staff meeting this past September she shared about her family and the Y's impact on her life during one of our story sharing sessions. Later, she talked with me more in depth about her life.

Her buoyant and exuberant personality would never betray an early life that was characterized by neglect, abuse and bouncing around from one foster family to another. But, that is exactly what Justine's life was like until the age of seven. Her biological mother had a drug problem and her dad left the family, leaving Justine and her two brothers, Mark and Jacob, as wards of the state. The three of them were separated from each other several times as they moved from one foster home to another. Thanks to the intervention of her aunt (her biological mom's sister), in 2001, things took a dramatic turn for the better. Her aunt, who lives in another state, sent out an email to her friends and people she knew in the Westfield area, with an adoption request for Justine and her brothers. One of those emails was received by a lawyer who was friends with Michael Butler. Michael and his wife, Michelle, had adopted a young girl, Bella, a few years back. The lawyer thought maybe they might be willing to consider adopting again. They thought it over and eagerly considered the possibility. Michelle Butler went for a visit to meet Justine, Mark and Jacob. Justine, at seven, only remembers being extremely nervous during the visit, wondering what was going to happen. Well, sure enough the Butlers fell in love with the three kids and the wheels began rolling for the adoption to occur.

For Justine it was a deeply poignant time in her life. She shared, "With my new family I really began to understand what it was like to have a family and what it was like to love and be loved. At the same time, my parents enrolled me in gymnastics at the Y and there too, I began to learn things I never really understood before. I learned what it was to have

someone catch you when you fall and what dedication, hard work and responsibility meant.”

Justine continued gymnastics for several years and then decided to try some other Y sports. She found that she didn't enjoy these as much and at 10 years of age, returned back to the gym team. She distinctly remembers her first day back, “Linda, (the head coach at the time) remembered not only my name, but who I was. That made me feel special. I realized that I was significant enough that the coach knew me. I will never forget that day.”

Justine progressed through a number of levels in her gymnastics career before a knee injury sidelined her. At sixteen years of age she turned to coaching the younger kids in classes and this past year, at 17, has been coaching the younger team members. Her passion for teaching and coaching was clearly palpable. “I love coaching”, she shared. “I love seeing the joy in the kids' eyes when I do something silly and make them laugh. I love it when I see them work so hard in practice, and then in a meet, it clicks. They land that dismount; they achieve what they have been working so hard at. There is just so much a child learns in gymnastics from basic locomotor skills, to understanding where your body is in space and how to react as it moves in space, to aspects of performing. Along the way, kids develop balance, flexibility, strength and endurance. It's a great foundational sport.”

That it is indeed, and its powerful effect on Justine's life is evidently apparent. Justine's first coach, Linda Wright, remarked on the development of this young woman; “It has been great to see Justine grow from the shy little girl that we met, into a strong part of our program. I am honored to see her pass on what she has learned about becoming a strong young girl to our current gymnasts. I am proud to have her as part of our Y Gymnastics family and look forward to watching her reach for and achieve more of her personal goals.”

Having spent just a short time with Justine, I have a sense she will go far in life. In the meantime, fortunately for us at the Y, she will impart her caring, strong leadership upon a whole lot of young eager gymnasts who will pay it forward, once again, someday.

For more information about the Y's gymnastics program, please contact Megan Wright, Head Coach, at 413-568-8631 ext 311 or meg@westfieldymcagymnastics.com.

Rosann Scalise

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