

Sense of Purpose

For Nick Vailas '76, helping athletes is a way of life.

by Marcia L. Santore

When he talks about his life, Nick Vailas '76 frequently uses the word "blessed." He is one of those rare people who can find the good in even the most trying circumstances.

Vailas was raised in Manchester, N.H., the second son of Panagiota Vailas, a Greek immigrant who raised five sons on her own while working in a shoe factory after her husband, Christos, abandoned the family and returned to Greece.

Although their mother is gone now, her children have built on her legacy to become successful, each in his own way. Art, the eldest, is vice president for research at the University of Houston. Jim is an orthopedic surgeon, John is a communications engineer and the youngest, Alex, is a commercial real estate developer.

Vailas says his mother had "a tremendous capacity to love. You never felt you weren't loved. When a child feels that, he can do anything."

They grew up in a tight-knit Greek community where Vailas found "plenty of love and compassion." He remembers the local Boys and Girls Club as a perfect place to hang out. There were parks and playgrounds, and sports was a way of life.

By high school, Vailas was playing football at Manchester Central High School under "two great coaches," Bill Hall and Wayne Sanderson. For two years, he and his brother, Jim, were even on the same team.

"Being from a single mom family, having a strong male role model was very, very important," Vailas says of the role football has played in his life. "You also developed relationships with boys from other neighborhoods, other walks of life, working together for a common cause. You learned to face your fears and develop a great physical work ethic, learning to work as a member of a team. Being a member of a team was very important—that sense of membership and belonging gives your life purpose."

The opportunity to continue playing football fed into his choice of Plymouth State, along with Plymouth's reputation in physical education and the institution's location. "I love spending time outdoors, whether it's hiking, fishing, etc.," says Vailas. "Plymouth was also close to home and allowed me to help my mother raise my younger brothers."



Nick Vailas '76 in The Fitness Network health club, which he founded. Photo by John Hession.

Vailas played receiver for one year and linebacker for three, under Coach Tom Bell. He majored in physical education, studying health ed, coaching and athletic training. "At that time, my life's ambition was to be a high school football coach and PE teacher with a strong athletic training background, to take care of athletes," he recalls, adding, "Having been an athlete, you learn to appreciate a good athletic trainer."

Today, Vailas lives in Bedford, near Manchester, with his wife, MaryAnn. Daughter Nichole (21) is a junior at Stonehill College, and sons James (15), Andrew (13), Thomas (10) and Michael (8) are all active in hockey, baseball, basketball and, of course, football.

Vailas has combined his background in sports and athletic training with his natural entrepreneurial inclinations. He has developed numerous physical therapy clinics and a health club. He still oversees these as general manager.

For Vailas, the importance of this room is not just about weight training and conditioning—it's about relationships.

His primary career is as CEO and chairman of the board of the Bedford Ambulatory Surgical Center (BASC), which he helped found. Eleven years ago, BASC began with a small group of physicians who wanted an alternative site for surgery, one that would focus on orthopedics and improving efficiencies in surgery. Vailas explains that the doctors wanted to control their schedules and have the opportunity to become masters of one field rather than "jacks of all trades." They also wanted to improve the patients' experience in terms of cost, quality and time.

Today, BASC has grown from six to 60 surgeons and was recently rated one of the 10 best ambulatory surgical centers in the United States by Today's SurgiCenter magazine (December 2003).

A chance encounter while observing football practice at Central High School in Manchester in the mid-1980s led Vailas to found the Safe Sports Network. He describes seeing some boys looking longingly through the fence at the practice. He asked them why they weren't participating. They said they couldn't afford the physical examination required to join the team. "The physical can be very expensive, especially for families with more than one child," he notes.

The Safe Sports Network would be the solution. Vailas found that doctors—specialists in orthopedics, cardiology and primary care—were very willing to volunteer their time. The Safe Sports Network physicians perform a battery of thorough exams on needy kids who want to play sports. The organization also educates coaches and provides athletic training coverage to local schools, as well as free walk-in athletic training for kids.

So Vailas' college dream of helping athletes has been realized in many ways, but what about coaching? He's fulfilled that dream as well, most recently by serving as interim football coach at Manchester's West High School. He stepped in at the beginning of the fall 2003 season when he realized that two weeks before the season, the school had no coach. His reason is simple: "Given how much I'd benefited from playing, I thought a school of West High's size shouldn't be without a coach. You want to help."

Many New Hampshire residents will recognize Nick Vailas' name from his well-publicized brush with public service last year. Vailas was chosen by Gov. Craig Benson to be commissioner of Health and Human Services and received bipartisan support. He stepped down after seven months in office when two projects in which he was involved were perceived as conflicts of interest.

Despite the problems and negative publicity, Vailas still sees the positive in the experience. He says, "I was truly inspired by the literally hundreds of people working for the state of New Hampshire, working to make sure that care is provided for the neediest. Most of us don't ever see what the need is."

Vailas continues, "I don't regret for one moment having the opportunity to work in that capacity. It was an honor, and an honor to work with so many incredible people."

Nick Vailas returned to the Plymouth State campus recently, and football was again the reason. He was serving as coach for the New Hampshire Shrine All-Star football team for the second year in a row. Teams from New Hampshire and Vermont had come to a training retreat on the Plymouth State University campus. It had been years since he had been in Plymouth's fieldhouse and he was very disappointed not to find an adequate strength and conditioning room. "I was taken aback by it," he says. "I made a few overtures, then felt guilty about not participating more meaningfully. I am who I am because of attending Plymouth and the schools in Manchester. I felt it was time for me to step up to the plate."

Vailas decided to make what fundraising professionals call a "significant contribution" to provide a completely modernized strength and conditioning room for students at Plymouth State University. His gift has inspired others to contribute to this project as well, under the Expanding Our Reach campaign.

For Vailas, the importance of this room is not just about weight training and conditioning—it's about relationships. He sees a strength and conditioning room as the place where players form bonds: spending time with each other, getting to know each other, talking with each other.

"The most valuable aspect of sports involvement is the bond you build with coaches and teammates," Vailas says. "In my eyes, you can't build a big enough sports and conditioning facility. It's a great place to hang out."