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April 18, 2018

Anna Pashkova ('16) was Member of "The Miracle Season" 2011 State Championship Volleyball Team

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.— A motion picture based on the inspiring true story of the West High School (Iowa City, Iowa) girls' volleyball team is hitting close to home for one Gardner-Webb University alumna.



Anna Pashkova (Photo Credit: GWU Sports)

In 2010, Anna Pashkova ('16) and her West High School volleyball teammates captured the 4A State Championship. A record-setting libero for the GWU Runnin' Bulldogs, Pashkova remembers the glory of that 2010 high school season. She also recalls the gut-wrenching news that shocked the entire Iowa City community on August 11, 2011—just weeks before the start of her senior year.

The team's star—setter Caroline "Line" Found—was tragically killed in a moped accident. The movie "The Miracle Season"—released earlier this month—tells the story of how the remaining players banded together under the guidance of their tough-love Coach Kathy Bresnahan—played by Oscar-winner Helen Hunt—in a successful quest to win a consecutive state title in Found's memory.

"Finding out the story would become a major motion picture was a long process, and so it was something we all soaked in over time," Pashkova shared. "Producers started approaching our coach and the Found family soon after the 2011 season and at first, they turned them down. Although there were quite a few differences between the movie depiction and what really happened, overall, I think the producers did a good job of capturing the main story behind the movie. We hope it is inspiring to many people."




The West High School Trojans as depicted in "The Miracle Season" (Photo Credit: LD Entertainment)

Actor William Hurt plays Found's father, Ernie, who had to process not only the death of his youngest daughter, but also the loss of his wife, Ellyn, to cancer just 10 days later. Pashkova isn't sure she truly understood the magnitude of the team's loss until the season

was over. “I had never experienced the death of someone I knew before,” she reflected. “As a team, we just knew we had to stick together and be there for each other more than ever. We even slept at each other’s homes for the first couple of weeks because we didn’t want to be apart.”

While the team continued to grieve, Coach Bresnahan was working to salvage the season. She no longer carried any hope that West High would be competitive enough to advance to playoffs—let alone make it all the way to another title match. Ultimately, she selected Found’s best friend, Kelley Fliehler, to become the team’s setter.

“Kelley was previously an all-around player—she could play as a hitter, in the back row, and she had good technical setting skills,” Pashkova recalled. “She still had to learn the ‘ins and outs’ of being a setter—which is a position typically developed over several years. She just had a few weeks.”



Anna Pashkova (middle) celebrates the 2011 State Championship victory (Photo Credit: Iowa City Press-Citizen)

The movie depicts a turning point in the season where the team begins to really click, and they realize they may have a shot at state after all. “During the first few games, we were still trying to figure out who was going to be our setter,” said Pashkova. “Those games were pretty messy. Once Kelley became our setter, things started coming together, and we started winning games. It was a battle the entire season, but the drive to keep going and striving for the win together and for Line pushed us forward.”

Game by game, the West High team marched ahead and managed to face off against their rival, City High School, at the 2011 State Championship. In a point-by-point showdown, West High emerged victorious after a successful shot down the line to secure the win in the fifth set. “The feeling was almost indescribable. It was such a huge mix of bittersweet feelings,” offered Pashkova. “There was excitement with such a big comeback, and relief that we had done it and it was finally over. It was emotional because of everything that had built up from losing Line and the fact that she wasn’t there with us.”

After such an incredible and emotionally-raw season, Pashkova wasn’t sure if she wanted to continue playing volleyball in college. “I actually went on my visit to Gardner-Webb in the middle of my senior season,” she reflected. “I wasn’t planning on playing, but what captivated me about GWU was the close-knit community that felt like home and resembled the community of support we had created in Iowa.”

She earned a Bachelor of Science in Exercise Science from GWU in 2016. Now a graduate student at Ohio State University, Pashkova is studying medical dietetics and hopes to become a registered dietician. She will complete the OSU program in 2019.

“My time at GWU reinforced the incredible benefits of a small community. It was so beneficial for my education, and I had the most amazing professors and advisor—Dr. Jeff Hartman—while I was there,” Pashkova declared. “We had difficult volleyball seasons in a different way than I had experienced before, but this also served as a teaching point in itself to continuously keep trying and never give up throughout the journey.”

Produced by LD Entertainment,
“The Miracle Season” is playing in
theaters nationwide. (Photo
Credit: LD Entertainment)

Overall, the lessons she has learned through her high school and college experiences have prepared her for whatever may come in the future. “I’ve realized that things aren’t always easy, and unexpected life events are bound to happen,” she explained. “We have a choice in how we respond to and deal with it. Line was a great example of how to live life to the fullest with passion—and to continually live in the present.”

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