

## **HERTZEL COLUMN: WVU player's courage shines through in speech**

By Bob Hertzell

MORGANTOWN — It was less than two weeks ago that we introduced you to West Virginia University freshman basketball player Danny Jennings, a 6-9, 260-pound man-child out of New York, telling you the story of his struggles through his early life.

We told you of how his mother had a drug problem and could not take care of him and how he became involved in the social services system in New York, his family broken apart, bouncing from family to family.

We even introduced you to Cora Darby, a wonderful woman with eight children of her own who took him in, loved him, nurtured him, showed him religion in the All Saints Church of Christ in God, where she was the longtime pastor.

From there we took you on his journey through prep schools, where he began one of the nation's most sought after recruits, winding up in West Virginia.

And that was where we left you, a seemingly happy ending to a story that cried out for a happy ending.

The truth, however, is that the story wasn't over, probably never will be, for we just can't see inside others. We can listen to their heart beat with a stethoscope, but we can't feel what their heart feels. We can't hear the crying that is still going on deep within them or see the scars that remain.

Then along comes a moment like the one that occurred Tuesday afternoon in the Jerry West Lounge.

Dr. Carolyn Peluso Atkins conducts a class on motivational speaking entitled SPA 170, Speaking to Communities.

A group of athletes is taught to overcome the fears of public speaking that almost everyone has. They spend the semester learning how to compose a speech, then travel to area schools and deliver them. They are personal speeches, mostly inspirational speeches of how they overcame problems or learned life lessons.

There have been hundreds of speeches given by now from some of the best known to least known athletes on campus, enough that Dr. Atkins put together a book containing the texts. They have ranged in subject matter from discovering God to overcoming drugs to family abuse to problems with the law.

This year's class happened to be one of the best, fullback Ryan Clarke, basketball guard Dalton Pepper, running back Mark Rodgers, basketball player Deniz Kilicli, special teams player Trippe Hale, wide receivers Bradley Starks and J.D. Woods, soccer player

Travis Pittman and defensive lineman Chris Palmer each giving their presentation.

Jennings was the day's final speaker. His topic? "Looking for the Light."

"Did you ever have one of those days where nothing goes your way and you want to give up? Well, I had a childhood like that," he began.

He took the audience through his journey from one foster home to another.

By the time he was 6, he had lived in six different environments, some loving and caring, most caring for nothing more than to get the support money from the state.

The picture he drew wasn't pretty. It ranged from getting soap put in his mouth for saying something bad to being made to stand in the hallway all night after having an accident in bed. He was not yet 4 years old at the time.

"When she did show affection, like when my mom came to visit, it was phony," he said.

By the time Jennings was 6, he was shy and backward, but caught a break with a woman he calls "Miss Harper," staying for two years before his mother fought for custody of him and won.

But soon it was more of the same.

"During that time, my mom began having problems again. That meant I was responsible not only for myself but my siblings," he said.

Danny Jennings was 8 at the time.

"That got to be too much for me," he admitted. He jumped the Staten Island ferry and ran away, back to Miss Harper's home, where she bathed him and fed him but could not keep him. He was returned to his mother, where he stayed a year before she put him back into the system again, ending up with Cora Darby in Staten Island.

"When I first arrived, she welcomed me in and I went to church the first day and attended every Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday service," Jennings said. "Even though I hated it at the time, I learned about faith and belief in God ..."

As he reached this point in the speech, Danny Jennings stopped and slumped over the podium that he dwarfed before him. His head was buried in his arm.

Whatever demons resided inside him had risen up to grab his tongue. Words would not come out.

Only tears.

Assistant basketball coach Erik Martin approached from the audience, where he had been standing in the back of the room. He asked Jennings if he wanted to go on. He did not reply. A minute went by, a minute and a half as Jennings tried to compose himself.

He pulled himself together, began again and completed the words that he had composed, words that came from a lifetime of hurt, and he finished his speech, noting that this journey had taught him two things about life.

“The first is this ... there is a difference between being tough and being cruel.

“The second is that no matter what happens I will NEVER give up! I will always look for the light.”

The crowd rose to its feet as one and applauded.

“That is the first time anyone has gotten a standing ovation in this class,” Atkins said.

No standing ovation was ever more deserved.