

Former Red Tornado star passes her sporting love on to local youths

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Karen Cotton didn't let a kidney transplant keep her from doing

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Some kids have nowhere to run, except on the streets. Karen Cotton thinks that's just wrong.

Kids, she said, need an outlet. They need a safe haven in which to expend some of their energy. They sometimes need guidance when it might not be available at home.

That's where Cotton steps in. She tries to fill one or more of those voids in the lives of area youth.

She does so through the Barney Ewell Track Club, which she established in 1994 and named in honor of Lancaster Olympian Barney Ewell.

"He said he thought it was great," Cotton said of Ewell's reaction to having the club named in his honor. "We wanted to honor him while he was still alive. This way, he'll be with us for the rest of our lives."

Making an impact on a youth's life is what makes Cotton keep going — and keep coaching.

It is, she said, a calling. It's the same type of calling she had as a youth, when she became interested in track at McCaskey. By the time she graduated in 1980, she was an L-L League champion and "one of the fastest girls around, at least that's what they (coaches) told me," she said.

As a freshman, Cotton anchored the 1,600-meter relay to a district championship and as a sophomore anchored the relay to a league record. As a junior, Cotton had the top times in both the 400 and 100, and in her senior year she was the fastest 100-meter sprinter in the area. She was inducted into McCaskey's Athletic Hall of Fame in 2007.

Cotton's interest in track never wavered, even when kidney disease cropped up. It's an illness that eventually took the life of her brother, Brian, also a standout athlete and 1983 McCaskey graduate. Brian Cotton received a kidney transplant in 2002, Karen Cotton said.

"That was hard," Cotton said of her brother's passing. Brian Cotton died April 13, 2005 from what Karen Cotton called kidney transplant failure. That was just a day after Karen Cotton got out of the hospital after receiving her transplant on April 6, 2005.

Karen Cotton's health, she said, is not back to where it was, but "I'm doing pretty good; can't really complain."

That's the same philosophy she takes into her passion — coaching track for kids. It's not just inner city kids, either. She said she's had kids from Hempfield and Manheim Township school districts, although the bulk of her athletes are city residents.

"My training is a little more boot-camp training; a little more tough," she said of her coaching philosophy. "They complain about it (training), but they see where it helps them. They really do. They actually see how it pays off."

Cotton has seen how her kidney transplant has paid off as well.

"I've been doing pretty good, thank God," she said. "I know I may never be back 100 percent, but I'm good. I'm doing good."

So are her kids.

She said she only had one athlete to begin this season, but by the end, she had nine. They practice at Franklin & Marshall College's track.

She said she's been blessed by having such nice facilities at her disposal, and that the kids really appreciate that as well.

"As long as they are happy, and staying off the streets and out of trouble, that's what makes me happy," she said. "I know the streets are hard. I know it's hard to grow up in the city. I've been there, but it's even harder now than (when she was a kid).

"My goal is to give them something constructive to do. I'm strong on the focus and discipline training. If they focus and have some type of discipline on my team, they can take that back to school. They need that in school."

Cotton had to be disciplined herself after receiving the kidney, which she got from an anonymous donor.

"All I know is that it came from someone from Harrisburg," said Cotton. "I'm not allowed to contact the family. That's just the way it is.

"Of course, I really wish I could do more. I'd like to thank them, but, you know, it's just the way it is."

Cotton, 47, is now accustomed to living her life with her new kidney. She said she's taking classes toward a business administration degree at Harrisburg Area Community College, having previously attended Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology.

"When I first received it (the kidney transplant), it did limit me," she said. "You just have to listen to the doctors and do what they tell you. It's just paying attention and being obedient to (taking) the medicine. Now, (I've got) about 98 percent of a normal life. That's how I am."

Cotton might be missing two percent of her previous life, but she's still giving 100 percent to her kids.

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