

# Nikki Caldwell Fargas, Part Two - A Role Model

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of August 10, 2020)

Benita Albert continues her insights gained about the successful career of one of the Oak Ridge's pride and joys. Enjoy the conclusion of an amazing story.

\*\*\*

Nikki Caldwell was the first Oak Ridge Wildcat basketball player from Oak Ridge High School to play for the UT Lady Vols and to do so under legendary coach Pat Summitt. In her freshman year, UT won the 1991 NCAA Women's National Championship in a thrilling overtime game against the University of Virginia.

Sports reports from the game give much credit to Nikki's strong defensive play in the ultimate 70-67 overtime victory. When I asked Nikki about the game and her role in it, she humbly replied, "I did some good things."

And she has continued to do good things throughout her interesting playing, broadcasting, and coaching journey.

Ironically, a part of that journey brought her back in contact with the University of Virginia less than a decade after the 1991 championship, but this time as an assistant women's coach for the Virginia Cavaliers. Working under head coach Debbie Ryan from 1999-2002, Nikki would travel with Virginia women's teams to the NCAA tournament every year. She was building a coaching resume', a set of accomplishments that ultimately has led to her current assignment as head coach of the Louisiana State University Lady Tigers.

This opportunity to tell Nikki's story has challenged me to look beyond the statistics, records, and rivalries; and to concentrate on the role model Nikki has become in her sport and in her outreach causes. She was interviewed by a reporter for the LSU *Reveille* news on January 31, 2018, soon after her team's stunning win (70-59) over the UT Lady Vols.

The article, entitled "We Back Pat: Pat Summitt's Legacy Lives On," featured Nikki and two of her assistant coaches with Lady Vol histories of their own: Mickie DeMoss who was an assistant coach for 18 seasons at UT and Tasha Butts who played for UT from 2001-2004.

They were asked, "How do you measure Pat Summitt's legacy?" Nikki replied: "It is something you cannot always put into words, what she meant. I just try to live the best way I can and hope she is looking down proud of us. We are proud to say we are a part of it."

Certainly, Nikki can claim incredible role models in her coaching life from her mother in Girl's Club play; to Lynn Burkey at RJHS and ORHS as well as AAU league competition; to Jill Prudden, ORHS head basketball coach; to Pat Summitt, beloved UT Lady Vols head coach. Now Nikki is writing her own phenomenal story. Let's first run a quick summary of a portion of her collegiate and career highlights.

Nikki graduated from ORHS in 1990, going from the Wildcat court to play four years at Tennessee (1991-1994). During Nikki's playing years, the Lady Vol guard was part of an impressive 118-13 win-loss record. Nikki's reputation as a tough defensive player and three-point shooter made her an important contributor to the team. She would return to UT as a graduate assistant coach in the 1999 season, and again for six seasons as an assistant Lady Vols coach and Director of Recruiting under Summitt (2003-2008).

The Lady Vols went to the NCAA tournament five of the six years of Nikki's assistant coaching tenure, and they won the national championship in 2007 and 2008. At this point, Nikki's eleven total years with Tennessee as a player and coach had prepared her to accept her first head coaching challenge at the University of California Los Angeles in 2009. Nikki's three-year UCLA career accomplishments: a 72-26 win-loss record, two NCAA appearances, and honors such as PAC-10 Conference Coach in 2010, all paved the way for her return to the Southeastern Conference in the 2012 season.

As LSU Lady Tigers head coach, Nikki has proved to be a formidable presence, building a strong assistant coaching team, recruiting talented players, setting high expectations, and securing six NCAA appearances in her nine LSU seasons. (Note: Due to COVID-19 quarantine, the 2020 NCAA postseason was cancelled.)

# Nikki Caldwell Fargas, Part Two - A Role Model

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of August 10, 2020)

Nikki knew the Division 1, Southeastern Conference to be one of the (if not THE) toughest competitive venues in which to coach. I asked her how she handled the pressure. She recalled one of her favorite Summit sayings, a message she has fully adopted: "I'm going to play anybody, I want to grow our game."

Nikki fondly remembered Henrietta Grant, ORHS Dean of Students who was for her an incredible role model as a strong black woman, and an encourager. She said, "Coming from Henrietta's example, I understood the value of hard work. Then to have Coach Summitt, to be a hometown girl, I knew I was part of a pioneer force for women's athletics."

Nikki recalled that women's basketball was not popular on television during her playing years, and that was an important element in further "growing the game." Thus, Nikki capitalized on her undergraduate degree in Mass Communications with specialties in Public Relations and Journalism to sign on with Fox Sports Net.South in 1995 as a color analyst for the once-a-week women's game they featured.

Nikki would continue and expand her media career through the 1997 season. She remembered the thrill of working with Knoxville sports and Vols broadcasting legend Bob Kesling, and she rejoiced at the greatly increased media attention which has developed for all of women's sports over time.

During her broadcasting years, Nikki ventured into further television work as the hostess of sports segments on 'Shop at Home', a Knoxville-based cable network show. During her coaching tenure at UCLA, Nikki continued as an analyst for Sports Central, for LA Lakers games, and for ESPN during the 2011 NCAA women's basketball tournament.

Thus, it is not surprising to see Nikki's later interviews as a coach, mentor, and sponsor for many charitable causes and to marvel at her poise and contagious enthusiasm on camera.

Nikki strongly believes in giving back through service, in particular in being a leading voice in the fight against cancer. She and good friend Holly Warlick, former UT Lady Vols coach, launched 'Champions for a Cause' in 2007 to raise awareness of breast cancer and funds research. Nikki and Holly rode motorcycles on long-haul road trips across the U.S. to fund raise. Nikki laughed about planning any future trips, but expressed caution about now being a wife and mother saying she might have to swap her beloved LSU purple and gold Harley for a 'trike'.

Their interest in promoting cancer research was prompted by family and teammates' illnesses, including a respected coaching colleague, Kay Yow. Yow was the head coach of the North Carolina State University Wolfpack women's basketball team, posting more than 700 wins in her 34 years at the helm (1975-2009).

Nikki is active on the Board of Directors of the Kay Yow Foundation/Cancer Fund. She recently posted an inspirational video, "Courage has to have HOPE" for the Foundation: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5iRZAcsKQY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5iRZAcsKQY)

She has also made videos supporting *JoiningCoachingCorps.org*, an association promoting adult mentors for youth sports. And you might enjoy watching Nikki's dancing skills dedicated to an extremely popular cause in Baton Rouge, "Dancing for Big Buddy." Nikki was the star performer in a 2013 fundraiser for this youth mentoring program, dancing with a partner to "Put on Your Boogie Shoes." She combined natural athleticism and personality to pull off a rousing performance. ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jx1I7Iwi5hl](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jx1I7Iwi5hl))

For the ORHS class of 2020, Nikki filmed a brief video of encouraging words, one of many ORHS alumni who joined in the effort to recognize and celebrate the graduation of this seventy-seventh class of seniors, a group ending their year like no other ORHS class. She appeared, wearing her ORHS senior shirt from 30 years before, and spoke from the heart, showing the grit and resolve she most certainly has used in her own life journey.

Among her words of advice: "Dealing with a crisis like COVID, know that it's going to pass and you're going to be better for it...What lies ahead is always going to be a mystery—don't be afraid of it, have faith, win, when life pushes you, you push back...Life is like a camera, you're going to take that shot and then look at it and capture the good times, let's say it's not a good time—through negatives we develop, and when things don't work out, you take another shot."

# Nikki Caldwell Fargas, Part Two - A Role Model

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of August 10, 2020)

Nikki loves her job, loves the game of basketball, loves to promote important causes, and she also very much loves and values her family time. It was during her time in Los Angeles that she met Justin Fargas, an Oakland Raiders running back. To hear Nikki tell it, their chance meeting at a Monday night gathering of mutual friends was love at first sight for her.

They have a daughter, Justice, born during Nikki's first season at LSU. When Nikki revealed her pregnancy to her players, she did so by saying, "I've got to keep my blood pressure down for the child I am expecting." This casually made comment to her players, within an appeal for their best efforts on the court, was met with screams, hugs, and wild applause.

When Nikki's mother, Jean, learned of the impending birth, she moved to Baton Rouge for support, and she has lived with Nikki and family ever since. Nikki describes her mother, not only as a wonderful grandmother, but now, a big fan of the LSU Lady Tigers.

Nikki mentioned that Justice is missing being around the team as well as missing being in summer basketball camps with her. She says that Justice understands that her mom must, of necessity, work from home during the COVID-19 quarantine in what Nikki called a new and different challenge. She stays involved with her players, and though practice is out of the question, her coaching staff and she are checking on their educational progress through summer school classwork.

The players' transition to online classwork has gone well, a change beginning for them in March. Nikki said, "They find a way, they have lived their lives with technology. It is our job to help navigate them through the now and to stay on track for graduation." Encouraging continued educational progress has also applied to overseeing Justice's online schoolwork and providing support and encouragement. Nikki describes a part of their mother/daughter down time as fun baking projects and outdoor recreational pursuits.

On the current societal challenges posed in the first half of 2020, COVID-19 health crisis and social unrest, Nikki offered words of advice. She spoke to the importance of equality in education while reflecting on her Oak Ridge Schools experience. She mentioned that, though she transitioned across three different elementary schools in her first six grades, the learning transitions were seamless, every school experience offered the same learning opportunities and challenges.

She praised the Oak Ridge model as one that promoted equity through deliberate curriculum coordination and well-defined school policies. She emphasized the need to hold people accountable, to make sure gaps in opportunities are filled, and to dismantle racism. She asked, "When is enough, enough?" while lamenting the needless death of George Floyd and also the fears and sadness some of her players have expressed re family injustices.

She said it is important that she, and everyone else, be positive influences via our actions, that we should all use our platforms for good, be it cautiousness in health matters or in actively condemning racism and violence. "Treat people like you want to be treated," is Nikki's coaching and personal rule.

Asked about the coming basketball season, Nikki said decisions are still on hold, that health concerns are the first priority. She praised the LSU administration for their continuing efforts toward keeping their students and staff safe. She firmly believes we should listen and follow the advice of the nation's leading health experts. And she reiterated that it is very important for her players to stay on track to graduation in this interim period.

Finally, I asked Nikki to describe what she considers successful practices she uses as a coach and role model for her players. She said, "I am goal oriented, and I don't let distractions take me away from my goals. I try to look through my players' lens, be in tune with my surroundings, and be open and approachable. I practice what I preach to them, namely, that when you walk into a room, do you light it up? And finally, leave this world a better place. My great grandfather wanted something better, and so it goes...I want even better for Justice and her generation." Nikki added, "I know my purpose...All of my steps to get here are guided...If I have a best quality, may it be servitude."

Nikki's words are full of wisdom and conviction; her coaching talent and her support for important public causes, inspiring; and her love of family and the Oak Ridge community, heartwarming. It is my honor to be able to tell the stories of so many

## Nikki Caldwell Fargas, Part Two - A Role Model

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of August 10, 2020)

successful Oak Ridge Schools alumni, and to share in the community pride we rightfully have for our former children, now important role models in the wider world.

\*\*\*

"If I have a best quality, may it be servitude" – take that to heart, readers. You have just experienced a lesson in life that if taken to heart will make each of us a better person. "Treat people like you want to be treated," is Nikki's coaching and personal rule...the "Golden Rule" in real life. Let us all try to be better people using Nikki as our example. Thank you Benita, for a resoundingly clear call to us all by capturing so well the truths Nikki lives.



A very classy lady, Nikki Caldwell Fargas

## Nikki Caldwell Fargas, Part Two - A Role Model

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of August 10, 2020)



Nikki coaching and encouraging



Judging from her expression - someone did something good!



## Nikki Caldwell Fargas, Part Two - A Role Model

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of August 10, 2020)



Obviously enjoying the game...



Speaking to the crowd

## Nikki Caldwell Fargas, Part Two - A Role Model

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of August 10, 2020)



**BASKETBALL STANDOUT:** Nikki Caldwell Fargas went from the Oak Ridge High School's Lady Wildcats to the Lady Vols and now coaches the LSU Lady Tigers. She also has a "winning" personality and is a role model to many. "If I have a best quality, may it be servitude," she said.