

DeHaven's memory alive at Head over Heels Gymnastics

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(Photo: Mike Tripp/The News Leader)

STAUNTON - It was a month after the car wreck that claimed his wife's life when Phillip Kauffman first walked into the gym again.

Stacey DeHaven died Oct. 11 in a car crash in Mint Spring. The 27-year-old woman was owner of Head over Heels Gymnastics in the Staunton Mall. After her death, the gym was closed through November as Kauffman and staff members discussed their options. Closing the gym permanently was never one of those options. It meant too much to DeHaven. It meant too much to the gymnasts.

DeHaven purchased the gym in 2010 when she was a senior at Bridgewater College. At the time there were just 40 students. At last count, that number has increased to 261, all because of the work DeHaven put into the gym. There are also 14 instructors helping with the various classes.



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The current owner, Phillip Kauffman talks about life at Head Over Heels Gymnastics after former owner and wife, Stacey DeHaven, died in a car wreck in October. (Photo: Mike Tripp/The News Leader)

She also turned the gym into a home of winners. Just look around the gym filled with balance beams and uneven bars and vault tables and lots of mats, and you'll see banners covering one of the walls honoring state champion gymnasts who have trained at the gym.

But it wasn't any of those things Kauffman noticed when he first returned to the gym. Instead, what hit him hardest was someone he didn't see — his wife.

"When I came around the corner I was always used to seeing Stacey somewhere on the floor," Kauffman said.

The two had only been married for 14 months, but had been dating for three years before the wedding. Kauffman had never been part of the gymnastics world, but that changed when he met DeHaven. He described himself as the "muscle" when it came to working with his wife at the gym. She would call him on his way home from work and ask him to stop by the gym and move this or repair that.



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Stacey DeHaven is pictured with her husband, Phillip Kauffman. Former owner of Head Over Heels Gymnastics, DeHaven died in a car wreck in October. (Photo: Mike Tripp/The News Leader)

"Of course I rolled my eyes then about it," he said, "but it's amazing how passionate I've gotten about it now."

Kauffman is a former Marine, having served for 12 years, including eight months in Iraq. That's one of the things he credits for helping him get through this tragedy. He saw death up close while serving in Iraq. When his wife was killed, he fell back on his military training.

"We were kind of programmed that you carry out the mission and you grieve when the dust settles," Kauffman said. "That was kind of what we were doing."

His mission in October became keeping the gym operating. He knew his wife would want that, so he and the rest of the staff at Head over Heels kept moving forward.

It wasn't easy.

Kristen Hamlin is the lead instructor at the gym. She was also friends with DeHaven. Throughout the last six months she's tried to remember that everything she's doing, no matter how difficult, is for the gymnasts.



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Head coach Kristen Hamlin works with members of the competition team at Head Over Heels Gymnastics on Wednesday, April 4, 2017. Hamlin and others have worked to keep the business going after former owner, Stacey DeHaven, died in a car wreck in October. (Photo: Mike Tripp/The News Leader)

Hamlin works with the competition team, the most dedicated and talented of the gymnasts. Before her death, that was one of DeHaven's jobs. The competition team members had to deal with a range of emotions following the fatal car wreck. Not only were they saddened by the loss of their instructor, the person who originally founded the team, but they also feared that without DeHaven the team and the gym would cease to exist.

Hamlin has been with Head over Heels for five years. She worked closely with DeHaven, including assisting with the competition team. All of a sudden it was just her making the decisions. During the time the gym was closed, she met with the gymnasts, not to practice their sport, but just to be together and comfort one another. Hamlin also reassured the members that there would still be a team. She would see to that.



Coach Sarah Beverage works with students in the intermediate 1 and 2 classes at Head Over Heels Gymnastics on Wednesday, April 4, 2017. Beverage and others have worked to keep the business going after former owner, Stacey DeHaven, died in a car wreck in October. (Photo: Mike Tripp/The News Leader)

Hamlin has carried through with that promise. In fact, the gymnasts are practicing now for their next meet. That one will be especially emotional. On April 22 the competition team, made up of 21 girls, will compete at 4 Star Gymnastics in Williamsport, Maryland, which was DeHaven's home gym from the time she was in middle school through college.

But Hamlin isn't worried. She's seen how close the team members have become since DeHaven's death and she knows they will do well at the meet later this month, despite everything they've been through in the last six months.

"It's been hard, it's been emotional in many ways," Hamlin said. "They've definitely grown as a team. They were really close before, but we're much more of a family now."

Kauffman said his wife's passion for gymnastics rivaled his for the military. He's thrilled that the gym, and the competition team that DeHaven was so proud of, will continue. It's one way the memory of DeHaven will continue to survive.