

Remembering Mr. Wildcat

Local Celebration honors Bill Keightley on April 1

By Kim Thomas



Photo by Alex Orlov

"It's not a job, it's just me loving my life!"

—Bill Keightley (when asked why he continued to do his job as University of Kentucky equipment manager, mentor, and the number one Kentucky Wildcat Fan.)

Even a year after learning the news, it's still hard to believe. When Kentucky lost its greatest Wildcat fan, longtime UK equipment manager Bill Keightley late last March, there was such an immediate sense of loss for anyone who ever watched a UK basketball game, you couldn't buy a smile in this town for over a week.

In fact, anyone who followed college basketball knew his name, knew his smile, and knew him as the unfailing supportive face of the Big Blue Nation, as fans rejoiced in many a UK victory, yet bowed in serious sorrow through five coaching changes, a near-death penalty, and the Christian Laettner moments of despair.

It's only fitting that Mr. Keightley will be honored on April 1, during an evening at his favorite hangout for an event Merrick Inn owners Bobby and Jennifer Murray say will, "celebrate the memory of our dear friend Bill "Mr.

Wildcat" Keightley. The anticipation of that night is quickly building, due in large part to the reveal of a new portrait painted by Jennifer's mother Mary Ann Wainscott of Mr. Keightley, which she began a little over two years ago.

Also on this night honoring Keightley, friends can drink "Special K's" (Diet Coke and Makers Mark...tall, very tall), enjoy his favorite dish of fried oysters, and bid on a chance to purchase Makers Mark items, along with other Kentucky favorites, a Cincinnati Reds package, and hand dipped glasses etched with the April 1, 2009 date. Former UK players Austin Kerns and Pookie Jones will contribute items to be bid on as well. Proceeds from the auction and a portion of the night's revenues will be donated to the Bill Keightley Endowment, which benefits University of Kentucky equipment managers.

DeAnn Stephens, (the newest member of the Moo Crew in the Morning, on 98.1 The Bull) says, "He is a missed man, and I am one blessed person for having known him. I know Merrick Inn was one of his favorite places in the world! I'm sure he will be right there with us in Spirit as we celebrate his life and contribute to the Endowment Fund."

To UK Basketball fans, he was a comforting presence, no matter how many technicals Coach Pitino was on his way to racking up, Bill Keightley was always there, right behind him, right behind the team, with that Semper Fi look in his eye. (He was a Marine, after all). And after Eddie Sutton's scandal-plagued tenure and resignation, how could WE give up on them, if Bill Keightley still believed the Cats could and WOULD win it all?

Then there was the uneasy shifting of the sands, aka The Great Transition, when seemingly mild-mannered Joe B. Hall inherited the coaching throne from Adolph Rupp. Even during that awkward and uneasy time for University of Kentucky devotees, the change in coaches did cause a wave of discomfort throughout the Bluegrass somewhat akin to a decade-long hiccup of the Big Blue psyche — and yet the one constant and abiding factor was this wonderful, smiling man called Mr. Wildcat who, like many, never gave up on the Cats, no matter what.

Yes, he was a comforting presence...even if you were only whistling from the upper arena.

As it turns out, coaches Tubby Smith and Billy Gillispie also looked to Keightley as the one constant force who kept things in perspective throughout all the ups and downs of their seasons.

Dave Baker says, "I've been blessed in my career to be around great players—great teams and great individuals—but none was a better gentleman or a better ambassador for the University of Kentucky than Bill Keightley. The rigors of major college basketball can take its toll on young men—much less someone in their 70s and 80s. But no matter how well or how poorly the team was playing, I never saw Mr. Wildcat have a bad day. He had a smile that was infectious and no one loved their 'job' more than Bill. Young men who were away from home for the first time & who were sometimes wilting under huge expectations, found a friend and a mentor in Bill Keightley. No matter what the season, that equipment room could be an oasis for many—including broadcasters."

UK's Susan Lax says "My stresses and problems instantly drifted away when I talked to Mr. Bill. I would always bring people by to meet him and if he saw them again, even years down the road, he would remember where they were from. He had an uncanny ability to make you feel special and he was one of the best huggers on the planet. I miss his hugs, his laugh, his stories."

Dick Gabriel recalls, "My earliest memory of Bill Keightley coincides with my earliest memory of covering the UK program full time, in 1974-75. He was already there, of course, and back then we could come to practice every day. And there he was, either near the practice floor or back in the equipment room.

"He had one of the strongest handshakes I've ever experienced, befitting a former Marine.

"A lot of us interviewed Mr. Bill, and we all wanted 'the



Photo by Alex Orlov

good stuff,' but he took most of that with him. He cared so deeply about the players, there was no way he was going to tell tales out of school.

"He did tell me a story about Keith Bogans, about something that happened just prior to Bogans' senior year. This was the season after 'Team Turmoil.'

"There had been a minor locker room dustup involving T-shirts that Keightley had made available to the players.

"My funniest memory is one you might not be able to use..."

—Dick Gabriel

Instead of getting into the middle of it himself, Bill went to Bogans, the team leader. Mr. Bill told me he said to Bogans, 'I don't want to go through another season like we had last year.' According to Keightley, Bogans said, 'I'll take care of it.' And he did."

Gabriel adds, "My funniest memory is one you might not be able to use: I was in New Orleans for the SEC Basketball Tournament the last time it was down there. I was hanging out on Bourbon Street with a former girlfriend and some of her buddies, and some of her pals had been over-served at the local pubs. One in particular took a dislike to some Alabama fans, razzing her from one of the balconies. When words failed her, she turned, dropped trou and mooned them.

"Less than two minutes later, here came Bill, walking up Bourbon Street toward us. A half dozen giggling women surrounded him, fawning all over him, giving him the rock star treatment. The woman who just a moment prior had made a statement with her backside shared the story of her exploits with Mr. Wildcat.

'My dear,' he said, "you laid your ass on the line."

Fans and Fellows

Keightley's happy hour buddies still sit at the bay window table of Merrick Inn's tavern most every evening, and if you ask them, you will hear great words of love and gentle kidding about this good spirited soul, who always joyously added-to but never took away from their close camaraderie. Stan Kerrick agrees, "Bill always said he never met

a man he didn't like, but he did say that there was one person he liked the least...but he would never tell us who that was!" Kerrick first met Keightley in 1962, and had just had dinner with him days before his sudden passing. Greg Williamson's eyes sparkle when they all talk about their friend. Williamson talks about his loyalty to the players and the coaches and also emphasizes that he never heard any note of discontent or discouragement from him. He was so easy to be with, long time friend Joe Flynn calls him the "life of the UK basketball program," and laughs, "He knew so much about me, we HAD to be friends!"

Merrick Inn manager and former bartender Amy Fisher became a Keightley fan when she served him as "a regular that you just love to see coming down the sidewalk and into the place! In fact, I still look out at the sidewalk and expect him to come walking up."

When he died, Fisher was aware that owners Bobby and Jennifer Murray were eagerly anticipating the result of a project that had been in the making for about a year prior.

Jennifer's mother, Mary Ann Wainscott was about to finish the portrait she was painting of Keightley, which she

had begun about two years ago. The portrait is to be placed in an honored spot above the bar.

Keightley knew about it, and was excited about the portrait; he had even furnished several photos for Wainscott to use as models. Since the finished portrait is almost done, Fisher then came up with a way to gather some of Keightley's best friends (and it turns, out that is *everyone*), reveal the portrait, and raise donations for the Bill Keightley Endowment Fund.

Jennifer Murray is full of admiration for her parents-in-law, Bob and Libby Murray who opened the Merrick Inn in 1975, and have had it ever since. Bob passed away in 1995, and his son Bobby, Jennifer's husband, took over the operations at that time, along with Jennifer. She says, "We are big on tradition, and since Mr. Keightley was such a fixture at the Merrick Inn, we are happy to host this event to benefit the Bill Keightley Endowment Fund." The Endowment provides scholarship funds to children of UK employees who, like Keightley, work as equipment personnel and lend support to the teams.

Libby Murray is thrilled that Mr. Keightley's portrait will soon be a permanent fixture there for all to see and treasure. When approached by Merrick's General Managers Amy Fisher and Geof Casey about having this event, Libby said, "Yes! Because he was the greatest man we've ever known!"

Empty Chair, Jerseys Honor Memory

Bill Keightley, (also known as Mr. Bill, or Mr. Smooth) served as Equipment Manager for 48 years. The Wildcats not only did not hire a new equipment manager for the 2009 season, but did in fact leave Keightley's chair on the Kentucky bench empty for the season in his honor. As an additional tribute, the first "K" in "KENTUCKY" on the players' jerseys for the 2009 season is outlined in black. The Bill Keightley Endowment Fund benefits equipment managers for the University of Kentucky, who Keightley affectionately called "my boys." ■

Merrick Inn owners Bobby and Jennifer Murray's invitation:

You are cordially invited to Merrick Inn to celebrate the memory of our dear friend Bill "Mr. Wildcat" Keightley. In tribute to Mr. Keightley, we will be having a silent auction where all proceeds will be donated to the Bill Keightley Endowment Fund. Guest appearance from Bill Samuel, Master Distiller of Makers Mark Distillery, who will be concocting Special K's throughout the evening.

April 1st from 6pm to 10pm in Merrick's Big Bar and/or Patio (weather permitting) and the silent auction will be announced between 9:30pm and 10pm.

RSVP is not necessary but appreciated. Please join us for this special event with friends and family who were all touched by Bill Keightley.

In memory of Bill "Mr. Wildcat" Keightley
1926 - 2008 ■