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A COLORFUL END

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Mrs. Michelle Mathison organizes her final Color of Hope Game, reflecting on its historic impact.

The slow, methodical beeping of a heart-rate monitor. The quiet breathing of a sleeping patron. The constant buzzing of doctors and nurses alike rushing to assist ailing patients.

Within this melancholic environment, a younger Mrs. Michelle Mathison silently sat at her mom's side in 2006 as her cancer battle came to a close. Longing for a distraction, she noticed a poster on the wall of Methodist Cancer Center showcasing each different type of cancer and the colors that represent them. Suddenly, she rapidly grabbed her flip phone and made a call: she had an idea.

That moment produced one of the most attended and emotional traditions at PLHS, the Color of Hope Basketball Game. The Color of Hope Game aims to bring awareness to cancer, its symptoms and the impact it has on both patients and their families. People buy different colored "Hope" shirts and choose the color based on what type of cancer they wish to support. The shirts are worn to the game showcasing the crowd's "Color of Hope."

This year is Mrs. Mathison's final year at the helm, due to her retirement after over 30 years of teaching. Her dedication and passion for the event are what made it a staple of the winter sports season.

The first year of Color of Hope was in 2006, and Mrs. Mathison had her hands full. In her initial meeting with the Athletic Director at the time, Mr. Chuck Johnston, they created a design that featured all of the different colors in one ribbon. The estimated cost for each shirt was $35, so they quickly pivoted, creating one central design with different colored shirts instead. That strategic decision ended up paying off, and they sold over 2,000 shirts. From there, Color of Hope became a highly-anticipated event.

The second year, 2007, was the first year that the opposing team reached out to Mathison to participate. She had a friend who used to teach at PLHS before moving to Millard South, who was the opponent that year. They collaborated on selling shirts, relying on Millard South's DECA chapter to reach their community. In the end, the second year was also a large success.

"Their school showed up big at the game, and we presented the check to ACS (American Cancer Society) together," Mathison said.

From then on, interest in the Color of Hope game ebbed and flowed depending on the current events of the time. In 2014, junior Nolan Zikas was diagnosed with bone cancer in his leg. The entire school rallied around him, both at the pep rally and the game. After a strenuous battle, his leg was able to be saved.

Another impactful year, for a multitude of reasons, was 2024. Mr. Shawn Gray was the focus of the year's campaign after he was diagnosed with stage four prostate cancer. He was featured in the pep rally as a judge for the dance competition and allowed Mathison to share his story. When he arrived at the game, the girls basketball team surprised him by wearing shirts colored light blue: the color of prostate cancer.

"Seeing the girls all wearing light blue, I was really touched by that," Gray said.

Additionally, Gretna was the opponent in 2024, and their longtime coach Brad Feeken had recently passed away from cancer. His team, coaching staff and community actively participated in the Color of Hope festivities, including PLHS head principal Mr. Jason Ryan, who was his longtime friend. After the game Ryan connected with their friends to reminisce on their memories with Coach Feeken.

"I remember exactly where I was sitting and the emotions that overtook me," Ryan said.

These emotions were the reason why Mathison came back every year and organized this event with so much passion. She wanted to make a difference in people's lives and help bring some hope to the people who were suffering.

"It's a labor of love, it's my baby and it's been something that I'm very proud of," Mathison said. "I hope that I have helped families get through some of the hardest times they're going to encounter."

Her efforts to spread awareness for cancer have been influential over the past 18 years. T-shirt sales spread to places such as Florida, Denmark and Guatemala. The grand total donated to the American Cancer Society from the 18 Color of Hope Games was $130,000. She has also shared multiple stories about individuals in the Papillion-La Vista community who were battling cancer, which fostered an unbreakable support system.

Mathison's impact reaches further than the Color of Hope Game. Throughout her career, she has served as a special education, math and English teacher along with coaching both cheer and gymnastics. She is someone fellow teachers look up to and simply brings a great energy to school daily.

"What I learned from her is just how much she cared about kids and how hard you have to work to make an impact," Ryan said.

Her presence will be missed next year, but the Color of Hope tradition lives on. She plans to act as a consultant next year to keep educating people about cancer.

"I hope it continues to become something that is educational, and I hope it continues to help the people who need it," Mathison said.

GRAPHIC BY SYDNEY SCHMID

1. Sophomore Nora Johnson battles for the ball during this year's Color of Hope Game against Omaha Westside. Johnson leads the team in steals per game (2.6) and blocks per game (1.0).
Photo Credit: Mackenzie Frederick
2. Mrs. Michelle Mathison holds up a "Hope" shirt at the 2025 Color of Hope Game. The funds from the purchased shirts were donated to the American Cancer Society. Photo Credit: Mackenzie Frederick
3. Junior Sam Boudreau walks through the warm up line at the Color of Hope Game as he is announced in the starting five. Boudreau went on to score 15 points, which led the team.
Photo Credit: Carly Peterson
4. Members of the junior committee present this year's check to the American Cancer Society. The junior committee supported Mathison every year with organizing the event.
Photo Credit: Carly Peterson