Jennifer Johnson Embraces a Non-Traditional Role

Betsy Roberts
When Jennifer Johnson was born in 1981, her two brothers were already playing soccer. “I suppose I started to play because they did,” she said, “but I continued all through school. I still play now.” Ms. Johnson first played on American Youth Soccer Organization (AYSO) teams and later played on travel teams and on Port Huron Northern High School’s varsity soccer team. She was named All-Conference Goalkeeper her senior year in high school.

At GVSU, Ms. Johnson majored in English and minored in physical education. “Both of my parents have degrees in education,” she said. “I thought it was so neat when we would be out, and former students would come up and say hello. My parents had great relationships with their students. I always had the idea that teaching was fun so I went into education as well.” Ms. Johnson graduated with her teacher certification in December 2004.

“When Jennifer graduated, the prospect of finding a teaching position in Michigan was bleak,” said her mother, Beth Johnson. “School districts were laying off thousands of teachers. There was little room for new hires.”

Undaunted by the lack of permanent teaching opportunities, in January 2005 Ms. Johnson began substitute teaching in Grand Rapids. She supplemented her income with her job at the Visser Family YMCA in Grandville where she had worked for several years as a tutor, coach and summer camp director.

Scott Gunn, Kelloggsville Middle School Principal, met Ms. Johnson at the YMCA where she was coaching his son. He told her the girls’ track team at his school needed a coach. She applied for the job and was hired.

Gunn also recommended her to Mike Fine, Principal at Kelloggsville High School (KHS), as a potential long-term substitute for a teacher who was going to be out the rest of the school year on maternity leave.

“We interviewed her, and it was evident she possessed many qualities one would look for in a teacher,” Fine said. “Ms. Johnson is sincere, humble, and hard working.” She was hired for the long-term substitute position.

While fulfilling that assignment, she applied to coach the varsity soccer team in the fall of 2005 and was offered the job. “This was a unique opportunity as she would be a female Head Coach for a young men’s (varsity) team,” said Fine.

Ms. Johnson knew that she would not be the traditional role model for these male athletes. She was confident, however, that with the survival skills and the grit and determination she had developed on the soccer fields, she could be a good role model and a good coach.

“I was only 6 years old when I started playing soccer,” Ms. Johnson said. “It was a popular sport in Port Huron, but at that time, it was mostly for boys. The first few years I played with AYSO, I was one of only two or three girls on the team. I had to fight to get the ball. I still remember my very first goal. I made the goalie, a boy, really mad! My dad coached me for the majority of my career. He was toughest on me. He didn’t want to play favorites; he didn’t—that’s for sure!”

Ms. Johnson took that example of toughness, tempered by her own feminine concerns, to her soccer players. Ajdin Ovnovic, a freshman player, had this to say: “Ms. Johnson was the first female coach I have ever had. I thought it would be weird at first, but it wasn’t. She was just as tough on us as a male coach would be. We had to run a lot and practice tons of drills. She would check up on our grades. She would also ask about our day and any problems we were having. I liked having Ms. Johnson for a coach.”

“We had a very young and inexperienced team,” said Ms. Johnson. “Several of our players moved out of the district during the season. There were times when we didn’t know if we would have enough players to field a team. These kids took it all in stride. They never gave up. They practiced hard, played hard, and had lots of fun. Many times a parent from the opposing team would compliment me after a game on our sportsmanship. That is what high school sports is all about. I think my players will be able to look back on the season as a great lesson on how to handle themselves next time they are tempted to give up.”

“I am so proud of every player on our team. I would like to see them all recognized for their accomplishments, but because we are one of the smallest schools in the area and have one of the newest soccer programs, it is difficult to get recognition for our athletes. I worked very hard to make sure one player was named to the All-Conference First Team; another got an Honorable Mention.”

“My greatest challenge was making sure the players were keeping up with their homework. Their dedication to soccer was already there. I want these kids to become dedicated students and good citizens as well as strong athletes.”

Bruce Foster, Athletic Director for Kelloggsville Public Schools, says Ms. Johnson has been a great addition to their coaching staff. “In her first year in the soccer program, Jennifer has established a foundation that will help the program grow in the future,” Foster said. “She is very dedicated to her team and
Ms. Johnson feels that personal growth is an important goal in organized sports. “The biggest lesson I learned playing soccer happened during a game I was playing goalie,” she said. “The other team scored a crucial goal because my defense was not communicating. I was furious. My attitude dropped, and I wanted to quit. My dad pulled me to the sideline as the game was going on and told me that my attitude affected everyone else’s attitude around me. My mood would either enhance their performance or bring them down. I have taken that advice and have used it with my own team. I take it into my classroom too.”

Fall of 2005, in addition to the soccer-coaching job, Ms. Johnson was offered a part-time position at KHS teaching At-Risk students. Principal Fine said, “She looked forward to this opportunity to make a connection and a difference with the students that struggled academically.”

With Michigan’s high-quality teacher-education programs and surplus of teaching talent, the state has become a prime recruiting location for other states where teaching opportunities are plentiful. Spring of 2005, recruiters from Baltimore, Maryland, had offered Ms. Johnson a teaching position in their school district. “I considered the Maryland job,” she said, “but I liked Kelloggsville High School—the staff, the students, and the challenges they offered me.”

Ms. Johnson is now a full-time teacher at KHS. She is a freshman class advisor and a judge on the creative writing committee. She has completed her second season as Kelloggsville Middle School girls’ track coach.

Thirty-six students have signed up to try out for the Rockets, the KHS varsity soccer team. Ms. Johnson will be their coach for the 2006 fall season. Because she was willing to venture outside the box—outside her realm of comfort and familiarity and into a non-traditional job—she has become a role model for a young emerging soccer team that any player, male or female, would do well to emulate.

“Ms. Johnson has embraced all challenges and is making a difference in the lives of the students at Kelloggsville High School,” Fine said. “She greets her students and athletes with a friendly smile and serves as a positive role model on a daily basis. We look forward to the impact she will make in our school.”

“I hope always to be an inspiration to my students,” Ms. Johnson said. “I want to encourage them to become whatever they dream to be. I love teaching these kids; I love them teaching me.”

Mary Adams graduated from Montcalm Community College in 1989 with an Associates Degree and received a Distinguished Graduate Scholarship to attend Grand Valley State University. She continued to excel, was inducted into the Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society, and graduated Cum Laude in 1991 from GVSU with an English language and literature major, elementary education minor, and an elementary teaching certificate. In 2002, Mary graduated from Western Michigan University with a Masters Degree in Reading.

Mary is employed with Greenville Public Schools, teaching at Lincoln Heights Elementary for the past 13 years. She is a proactive team player, choosing to be part of the solution. To meet her community’s needs, she worked to create Mentor-A-Mom, a birth to school-age mentoring program designed to support at-risk mothers with their parenting skills and provide education in the areas of health, development, and school readiness.

She and another 4th grade teacher developed a team approach, which has since been adopted by other district fourth grade teachers. Mary co-authored the application that earned her school a Blue Ribbon Exemplary School Award last year. Mary loves being a part of the Lincoln Heights team—a fun-loving group of highly effective individuals with a shared commitment to do whatever it takes to provide the best possible education for all students.

Last year, she was selected by one of her former student graduates to be named in Who’s Who Among America’s Teachers, an annual publication in which graduating honor students are offered the opportunity to select one former teacher for recognition.

Mary has provided extra opportunities for her students, starting a student-staffed school store, student-authored newspaper, and written several grants, which brought enriching programs and equipment to Lincoln Heights. In her classroom, Mary is often heard saying, “I just learned something new and that makes this is great day!” She instills this same enthusiasm for learning in her students. She embraces the principles of Love and Logic, and she incorporates strategies proven effective through brain research. Mary feels strongly that it is important to remain centered in a strong foundation of basics, balanced with an effective mix of new strategies, programs, and technologies, rather than swinging endlessly on the pendulum of extreme change.

When she is not at school, Mary relaxes with a good book in her Greenville home and enjoys spending time with her four grown children and five grandchildren, her parents, and her brothers and their families.