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From Reading High to Alvernia, Noray acing game of life

Cassandra Noray, part of the Reading Collegiate Scholars Program, excels on the tennis court, in the classroom and in the community.

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When Alvernia University and Olivet Boys & Girls Club began the Reading Collegiate Scholars Program, the organizers had someone like Cassandra Noray in mind.

Noray, a 2014 graduate of Reading High, has excelled in the classroom, on the tennis court and in the community during her four years at Alvernia.

"It takes an immense amount of time and an immense amount of pressure to be a college athlete," said David Myers, director of Alvernia's O'Pake Institute for Ethics, Leadership and Public Service and the coordinator of the scholars program. "For her to be able to do that, still do some of the stuff she's done in the community and to stay strong academically is pretty significant."

Noray carries a 3.36 grade-point average and will graduate next month with a degree in healthcare science. She's made the All-MAC Commonwealth tennis team three times and the Academic All-MAC team last year.

Just as significant, she's gone back to Reading High to tutor and coach students and to Millmont Elementary School to work with youngsters there. She also serves as an instructor in the COR Tennis Program, where she learned how to play and which has been recognized nationally.

"I really enjoy helping the kids," Noray said. "When I was growing up, I didn't have to do much. I had a lot of help and a lot of support. When I was able to go back to Third and Spruce (Rec Center), Reading High or the Olivets, teaching the kids was important to me."

Although she had strong grades at Reading, her college plans were uncertain until the spring of her senior year. One of her teachers told her then about the new scholars program and that not many students were aware of it.

"He said that I should apply and try to get into it," Noray said. "That's what I did and I got it. It just shifted everything. I really didn't know what I wanted to do. I was sending everything to Alvernia right before the deadline. It was very last minute."

The program is aimed at preparing high school students from the Reading School District to attend and succeed in college. It provides full-tuition scholarships to Alvernia with support from the university, the Olivet Club and private donors and foundations.

Students must maintain a GPA of 2.5 and be involved on campus and in the community.

"The critical thing we want them to do is to give back to the community," Myers said, "We want them to understand that they've been given a real benefit. You should pay it forward by doing stuff with other people."

Noray started playing tennis when she was 8 and began participating in COR when she was in fifth grade. During the summer she would ride in a van from Third and Spruce to the Reading High courts at Hampden Park.

"I'm a very competitive person," she said. "I liked the fact that I could take the game into my hands. It's just a fun sport that I could play throughout my life."

Noray joined the Reading High tennis team as a freshman, continued to improve and made the All-Berks team as a senior.

"She was intense and coachable," said Red Knights coach Russ Moore, who along with Larry Zerbe have served as the greatest tennis influences in her life. "She's outstanding. Her life could have gone in a different direction, but she's a success. She could do anything well. She's a really good kid. Her mom did a good job with her."

Noray began working as an instructor in the COR program as a high school freshman.

"Oh, my God, she's very good at teaching," Moore said. "She puts herself into their shoes. She knows how to teach. She's been around me and Coach Z (Zerbe) since she was a kid."

"She's really good with the kids. I can't say enough about her."

As a freshman at Alvernia, Noray won the No. 5 singles title in the MAC Individual Championships and was selected to the All-MAC Commonwealth second team. She was a first-team selection the last two seasons.

She also has found time to go back to Reading High and tutor students there about the scholars program and teach them about what to expect in college. These days, she spends 15 hours a week in a work-study program at Millmont, helping pre-kindergarten students during school and first- and second-graders after school.

"She's a lovely young lady," said Mary Lou Kline, Noray's community mentor with the scholars program. "She's down to earth. She has humor, humility and athletic ability."

"She's focused on the court. A different side of her comes out. Off the court, she's friendly and compassionate. She doesn't blow her own horn."

Noray hopes to become Alvernia's all-time leader in singles points in women's tennis in the next month. Then she graduates and faces difficult career decisions.

"It's scary right now," she said. "I think I want to get back into physical therapy, but I'm not 100 percent sure. I'm indecisive."

Those who know her expect great things from her. She's been a success story that can be used as an example for many children in Reading.

"I know she's still trying to figure out what she wants to do, but she obviously likes young people," Myers said. "We'd like to try to help her as much as we can. She's independent. I have a great deal of respect for her.

"She has a focus. She's been accomplished here. She knows where she wants to go."

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