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Philadelphia Freedom



Written by Tony Mussari

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Philadelphia Freedom: Earning the Light of Success

By Tony Mussari

Maturity begins to grow when you can sense your concern for others outweighing your concern for yourself. John MacNaughton

With the melody of Elton John's 1975 hit "Philadelphia Freedom" reverberating in my mind, Kitch and I left Windsor Park in the darkness of a beautiful Sunday morning. As we drove the blue lined roads to our connection with Interstate 80, we saw a magnificent sunrise that filled us with a kind of awe and joy that does not happen often.



We were headed to Philadelphia by way of North Plainfield, New Jersey. Bernie Taupin's words sung with energy and conviction by Elton John said it all:

**I used to be a rolling stone
You know if the cause was right
I'd leave to find the answer on the road**



Less than three hours later we were standing on Wilson Avenue in front of the high school waiting for the cheerleaders and the 16-passenger school bus that would take us to Temple University and Cheer Tech's Thanksgiving competition.

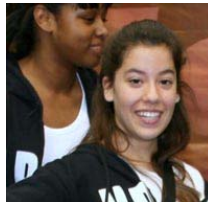
At 9:20 a.m., we were on our way. The ride was pleasant and interesting. Sitting in the first two seats, Kitch and I could almost hear the heartbeats of everyone on the bus.

After the ten cheerleaders finished the portable breakfasts that energized them, their eyes opened wide and conversations began. They talked about all the things that are central to a teenager's life: school, homework, movies, music, dating, shopping, clothes, and fashions.

There was little or no conversation about the competition until I focused my camera and began to ask them about the main event. The answers were somewhat reserved and predictable. These young women are disciplined in everything they do. They are not the loud and boisterous type. In fact they are anything but, and that is one of the many things that make them so interesting and appealing.



When I asked one of the captains, Toni Costello, about the competition, she answered the question. Then she diplomatically told me that she was not the captain of the group on this day. I was taken by her desire to shine the light on the leader of the dance team. Toni's behavior reminded me of one of my favorite quotations: "A mature person walks humbly and deals charitably." Eleanor Roosevelt.

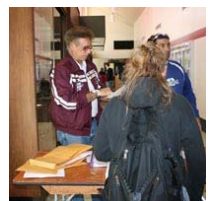


Monica Ramirez, the dance captain, was equally graceful when she answered my questions. "I teach the girls the dances," she told me. According to Monica, "being able to work together, and becoming a family," are the two most important requirements for success.

Christianna Blue and her sister, Chelsea, are members of the dance team. Their mother was riding on the bus, while their father and brother were following in the family car. Mrs. Blue expressed the hopes and dreams of everyone connected with the cheerleaders with thoughtful and balanced words: "I hope they come in first, but as long as they give their best effort and they do their best job, that's all we can hope for."



The wonderful sounds of ten high school students having a very good time continued all the way to the Ben Franklin Bridge. The bus grew silent as we approached Temple University.



Once inside the gymnasium, we were greeted by Glenn Kingsbury, CEO of Cheer Tech, the sponsor of the event and Karen Drew, Director of Cheer Tech. They were pleasant and very welcoming. Kingsbury believes that cheerleading gives young people positive reinforcement, a sense of teamwork and leadership skills. Drew believes the sport gives participants something to do with their spare time. It teaches them how to deal with winning and losing.

Coach Skip Pulcrano registered everyone, and Kitch and I were given all access wrist bands that enabled us to do our work without distraction.

For the next three hours, we were surrounded by the largest delegation of cheerleaders that I have ever seen, and the loudest and most energized music I have ever heard. Nevertheless, the sights and sounds of the competition were not able to extinguish the flame of Philadelphia Freedom.

Watching the North Plainfield cheerleaders take the mandatory steps that preceded their performance, a number of things became very clear. They were the smallest group of cheerleaders. Unlike the other competitors who had dozens, and in one case hundreds of fans in the audience, North Plainfield had six people in the audience to cheer them on.



When the call came to enter the warm-up room, the cheerleaders moved quietly and purposefully to a room behind the bleachers. Sitting on the floor watching the two teams that would precede their trip to the stage, something happened that defined their dignity and class.

There was a misunderstanding between an official and a coach about warm-up time. The coach refused to leave the area. The North Plainfield cheerleaders sat and waited patiently. Instead of sulking, they focused their attention on another team in the tumbling area. These youngsters were excellent, and the North Plainfield girls began to applaud and cheer them on. It was a singular event, and one that left an indelible

impression.

Watching their hearts beat for someone else, I thought to myself, what a defining moment! How characteristic of these young women and their values.

On this day, their moment in the sun lasted but two minutes. In those 120 seconds they danced their way into the hearts of the judges, and they received very high scores. Their first place plaque will record this moment forever.

After the awards ceremony, Russell T. Blackwell, one of the icons of the cheerleading industry and one of the judges of the Cheer Tech competition, complimented the North Plainfield team with these words: "North Plainfield you did an outstanding job. Keep up the good work. Don't forget your basics. Keep doing it, never, never quit. Thank you for giving me a nice show. Today's competition was my first show this year seeing a real Hip Hop team. You girls did a great job."



As they stood there in the center of the performance stage, I thought to myself how beautifully they handled this moment.

They were disciplined, dignified, and very graceful. They were true to themselves, their parents, loved ones and teachers who helped them become, impressive in every way.

They were breathing the light of success in a place known for shining the light of freedom on everyone.

Describing these students and this event would be impossible without repeating the words of the song that carried me through this wonderful day, the song that captured what Karen Drew called the pure joy and excitement of their special moment:



**Shine a light through the eyes of the ones left behind
Shine a light shine a light
Shine a light won't you shine a light
Philadelphia freedom I love you, yes I do**

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